The Deadly Dark Affair

Robert Hart Davis

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By Robert Hart Davis

The cunning of a madmen…the creative brain of a boy genius–together they had forged a weapon of ultimate horror that could plunge the world into black ruin. Only Solo and Illya stood in their way and the sands of time were running out too fast…

PROLOGUE

WHERE DID THE GOLDEN GATE GO?

If it ended with the kind of terror and crisis typical of a major confrontation with THRUSH, it began with a kind of terror somehow typical of San Francisco.

A cable car was clanging in the crisp twilight. Heedless of the California traffic laws about stopping for pedestrians at intersections, a Comet Cab careened uphill. It turned left in front of the cable car at California Street, narrowly missing two girls. The motorman rang his bell furiously.

People moved into the intersection again. The first cab shot on up toward the crest of Nob Hill.

“Give them the horn!” Napoleon Solo yelled from the rear seat of a second cab racing up the hill toward the busy intersection. “If you don’t we’ll kill somebody making that turn.”

The driver edged around the right side of the cable car and leaned on the horn.

An executive who had been about to jump off the cable car hung on. The cab’s left fender grazed the man’s shoetips as the driver outbluffed the motorman and made a wide turn into California.

The taxi missed a florist’s van in the oncoming lane by a whisker. Pedestrians melted out of the way. Finally the cab had a clear shot ahead. The driver floored it.

“They always tell us U.N.C.L.E. is supposed to safeguard the law, not break it,” said the taxi driver.

“We chose the lesser of two evils, I’m afraid,” said Illya Kuryakin. He looked as tense as Solo. Both of them were sitting forward in the rear seat.

Illya’s right cheek bore a bruise. His left jacket pocket hung in shreds. Napoleon Solo’s custom-tailored suit was in an equal state of disrepair. And Solo had several other reminders, including a fiercely aching spot just over his kidney, of the fight just minutes ago in the shipping office of Pacific Fisheries, Ltd., on the Embarcadero.

Illya Kuryakin said something less than polite. A large, expensive automobile with a white-haired senior citizen at the wheel pulled jerkily into the intersection toward which they were racing. It stopped. Apparently the old gentleman had stalled his engine. His be-chromed chariot confronted the speeding cab broadside.

The driver paled, slammed the brakes as the cab came rocking to a halt, one foot from the stalled car.

Napoleon Solo craned for a view of the street ahead. The stalled machine blocked much of what he wanted to see.

"We'll get out and walk," he said, levering the door handle down on his side.

When Solo put his weight on his right foot his leg nearly collapsed. Illya jumped out the other door. The U.N.C.L.E. agents took to the right-hand sidewalk while their driver uttered a long, shuddering sigh of relief.

Solo could see ahead now, up the slope of the sidewalk to the end of the next block. The Comet Cab was pulling in to the curb. Twilight sun, golden and growing feeble, leaked out of the west directly into Solo's eyes, making it difficult to see. Already a tinge of the fog was in his nostrils.

A light blinked on in a drugstore window as he and Illya pounded up the sidewalk. Halfway to the top, a pair of black stick figures, men silhouetted against the evening sun, jumped out of the Comet Cab. One carried an attache case.

The Comet taxi had stopped at the head of the cab rank on this street, just at the corner. The THRUSH agents raced to the right, vanishing behind the huge marble cornerstone of the Mark Montfair Hotel. Then one of the men wheeled back into sight, whipping up his right arm.

Something tubular extended from his right hand like an oversized finger.

"Down!" Solo shouted. He bowled Illya over with his right shoulder.

The soft, lethal triple *chow* was barely heard in the cacophony of evening traffic. Flakes of concrete lifted from the sidewalk where Solo and Illya had been running a moment ago. The U.N.C.L.E. agents clambered up and sprinted forward along the unbroken marble facade of the hotel's lower floor. The THRUSH agents vanished again up at the corner.

During the deadly seconds when they'd dodged bullets, Illya instinctively pulled his U.N.C.L.E. pistol from an inner pocket. Such was the heat of the chase, the perilous importance of not losing their quarry, that

he forgot to hide it again. When the two agents rounded the corner, Illya still had his gun in his right hand.

He skidded to a stop.

Two feet in front of them, a smart-looking matron was dragging on the leash of her clipped, yapping poodle. The woman has several thousand dollars' worth of mink on her shoulders and a bemused smile on her face. She glanced at Solo–unkempt, hair mussed, a vicious-looking purple bruise on his left jawbone. Then she studied Illya with equal calm, seeming to rather admire his boyish looks and bowl haircut.

It was this typical fashionable lady of San Francisco whom the U.N.C.L.E. agents had avoided knocking down only by great effort and the braking power of their shoe soles.

"A pair of men," Solo said. "One had an attache case handcuffed to his wrist. Which way did they go?"

In any other city the lady would by now have been screaming in terror. "Down, Bosworth," she said to her poodle. One immaculate glove pointed to the gilt entrance of the twenty-story Mark Montfair Hotel. "They went in there. My, that's a realistic looking pistol."

Illya tugged Solo's sleeve. Whispered, "And that's a realistic gendarme coming, Napoleon."

Solo whipped around. One of San Francisco's finest was bearing down on them with a hostile, suspicious glower. Solo spied an unpainted delivery truck parked at the service entrance of the old red stone Union Pacific Club just across the way.

"Back, back, officer!" Solo cried, gesturing and pointing. "You'll ruin this take."

The officer halted on the curb. "What the devil are you talking about?"

Solo indicated the panel truck. "The camera's running right now."

"You're *movie* people," the woman explained. "I should have known. They're always up here shooting chase sequences." Typically San Franciscan, she lost interest. The poodle yapped.

Solo started for the hotel's main entrance. He shouldered past the knot of guests, doormen and bellboys that had collected. He called back over his shoulder, "We're doing an U.N.C.L.E. Production called *The Birds Are Flying.* On your theater screens soon. Watch for it!"

And he plunged into the revolving door with Illya Kuryakin at his heels.

The policeman’s frown of puzzlement–it could be true; there were often Southern California nuts filming chase scenes on colorful Nob Hill–gave the U.N.C.L.E. agents the edge they needed.

Quiet pandemonium reigned in the lobby. A bellboy with blood dripping over his split-open forehead lay by one of the Express elevators. An assistant manager dithered. Solo and Illya raced up as the bellboy panted:

“Two of ‘em, Mr. Withers. I told ‘em the next chopper wasn’t due from the airport for another twenty minutes. One pulled a gun and smacked me–”

An unobtrusively as possible, Solo and Illya edged around the gathering crowd to the next car in the bank. Solo thumbed the call button. Tense moments passed.

Solo was afraid they would be noticed, questioned. Illya peered back into the lobby.

“Oh-oh. The law has discovered there isn’t any camera in that truck. He’s coming this way.”

The crest-blazoned doors of the elevator popped open. Solo dived inside, taking just time enough to notice the display board for the next car indicated that the stolen elevator had reached its rooftop destination. Amber lights spelled out the word *Heliport.*

Solo’s nerves tightened another notch. Illya leaped into the car just as the policeman shouted a command to stop.

“Heliport, fast,” Illya said.

The operator shut the door and gave the bruised, bedraggled pair the fish-eye. He didn’t start the car.

“You’re early,” he said. “The next chopper isn’t due in until–”

Solo brought up the business end of his long-muzzle gun. “We like to get places early. You make sure we get up to the heliport early, would you?”

The operator punched the button.

Solo wasn’t particularly proud of himself, terrorizing an innocent person this way. On the other hand, he and Illya could afford no more delays. No more delays at all.

They had been on the West Coast three and a half days, working night and day to track down the THRUSH cell which had been hiding behind the cover of Pacifica Fisheries, Ltd. It was a particularly noxious and clever operation in which this cell had been involved. Its function was to import narcotics.

A plastic flounder had turned up a month and a week ago in the net of a Portuguese fisherman operating out of Fisherman's Wharf. Inside the dummy fish was a waterproof phial carrying a small fortune in uncut heroin. The Portuguese reported it.

U.N.C.L.E. had amassed evidence in the past year that as part of a continuing program to undermine its enemies in every conceivable way, THRUSH had opened fresh narcotic pipelines into the country. The plastic fish finally gave a clue as to how the goods were smuggled in.

Finally, with some aid from a sleek, unpainted U.N.C.L.E. cutter, Solo and Illya had caught another fishing boat–the guilty one–just yesterday, off the San Francisco Banks in the early evening fog.

The THRUSH skipper was a low-echelon man. He talked.

Twice a month a THRUSH submarine dumped several dozen of the plastic fish into the water of the banks. Then the two little boats owned by Pacifica Fisheries, Ltd., cruised the area. Electronic gear hidden in the bellies of the trawlers hooked in on magnetic recovery devices installed in the heads of the fish. Up from the deepest deeps the fish came homing, straight into the nets, where they hid as part of a real catch, and brought their poisonous contents safely and easily onto U.S. shores. Somehow one fish had malfunctioned, and the Portuguese sailor had netted it.

Solo and Illya had followed the trail to the shipping office on the Embarcadero. The THRUSH cell had dissolved in the midst of gunfire. But the section chiefs had gotten away in the melee. In the attache case handcuffed to the wrist of one of them were all the cell's records, very likely including the all-important list of couriers who carried the fresh heroin across America and distributed it. That list U.N.C.L.E. wanted.

The elevator rose steadily.

"If they're going to the heliport," Illya said, "they must be expecting a pickup."

"One of them could have gotten a message out during the fight," Solo said.

The operator said, "H–heliport," as though about to faint from terror.

Solo didn't waste words as the door opened. He thrust the operator back into the corner, then followed him there until the doors were open full.

No THRUSH bullets came slamming into the cage.

With a single long stride apiece, he and Illya went out of the car into the terrazzo foyer of the ticket and boarding area. A gateman passenger agent

lay sprawled with a bullet hole in his temple. A ticket girl, wounded in the shoulder, slumped on the counter. In the waiting area a young mother huddled in a chair, eyes wide with fright. She hugged her little girl and the little girl's suitcase against her.

Directly ahead, out on the sun-and-shadow flatness of the concrete landing pad, two flight controllers had been shot down. Their bright yellow coveralls were black with ugly flower-like bloodstains.

The wounded flight controllers lay beyond glass doors. And on the pad proper a huge gunmetal-gray 'copter was just setting down, its rotors slowing to a whine.

The two THRUSH agents were hurrying toward the unfolding hatch. The whirly-bird had to be a specially-summoned THRUSH craft kept on call for hasty escapes such as this. Solo took a tight grip on the butt of his pistol and raced ahead.

Illya came right alongside. They hit the glass doors low, like football blockers.

The doors sprang outward under the impact. From the helicopter's cockpit the pilot spotted them, began to wigwag furiously to the THRUSH agents getting aboard.

One of the agents twisted round, Solo remembered him, an emaciated middle-aged man with a disfiguring white scar near his right ear. His companion was stouter, a more polished-looking man wearing a homburg. He carried the attache case and was already up inside the 'copter.

The thin Thrushman's mouth twisted unpleasantly. He jerked a pistol from under his coat. Solo threw himself out prone. The bullet missed by a fraction, putting a huge crystal star in the plate glass waiting room window.

Illya dodged behind a guard-rope stanchion. Solo propped up his gun hand by using his elbow. He fired. White-scar cried out, staggered.

The THRUSH pilot was frantically giving the thumbs-up signal, urging takeoff. White-scar went to one knee, hands reaching up desperately for the 'copter hatch. He couldn't quite catch it. The pilot worked the controls.

Utterly without emotion, the Thrushman in the homburg looked down from the open hatch as the giant 'copter rose.

White-scar screamed, tottered to his feet. Homburg scowled in anger, gave a single thumbs-up signal to someone inside the craft. White-scar fell down again, wailing and left behind. The craft's running lights flashed on, for the dusk was well advanced.

Solo scrambled to his feet. Up here the wind keened. The great glittering hotels of Nob Hill, the gleaming necklaces of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges and the lighted splendors of Marin County and Oakland made a breathtaking circular panorama. Car headlights shone by the thousands.

Illya leaned back and pumped bullet after bullet at the rising ‘copter. Solo heard them sing and ping off armor plate harmlessly. He growled under his breath. They had lost their catch. Now he had to see whether special planes could move in fast and track the helicopter before the attache case and the courier list were gone, lost in the night darkness rolling fast out of the east, there beyond Oakland’s hills.

Furious with himself, Solo reached into his coat pocket for his communicator. Suddenly something caught his eye. He spun half to the right, peered far westward across the lighted jewelbox of the city.

Where Marin County should have been, there was darkness.

And there was a sweeping black blot of darkness too where only a moment ago the shining chain of the Golden Gate bridge had lit the way to Marin. Solo saw nothing there now, no bridge lights golden in the dusk, no white or red auto lights, only blackness. And the darkness was working its way eastward into the city like a tide, coming in past the Presidio, past the outlying areas. Every single light in street after street, section after section began to flick out like dominoes falling.

“The bridge, Illya!” Solo shouted over above the suddenly loud roar of the ‘copter. “The bridge and everything else is blacking out. It’s–”

Why was the rotor racket increasing? Solo glanced up, gasped.

The helicopter was plummeting erratically, plummeting straight down. Its rotors spun faster than normal, threatening to fly off. The cockpit was pitch black. All the running lights had gone out.

“An electrical failure,” Illya yelled as the roar increased. “It’s incredible.”

“Like New York’s,” Solo replied. “Only worse. Look.”

High to the south he had spotted a gigantic four-engine commercial jet rising on takeoff from San Francisco airport. It too flew without running lights. And now it was banking steeply, much too steeply.

“He’s making a forced landing!” Illya could barely be heard above the noise of the THRUSH ‘copter shuddering and pitching down toward the pad.

Suddenly the THRUSH craft heaved violently. It was still fifty feet over their heads. The cockpit window slid back. The pilot thrust out a pistol, his face a white blur of rage. Illya shoved Napoleon Solo hard as the pilot's gun cracked. Illya tumbled, coming up on one knee beside Solo. Illya's silenced pistol popped, popped, popped again. They heard the pilot's faint scream in the rotor thunder.

"He must have thought we'd killed his power somehow–" Illya began.

He was interrupted by the shriek of the rotors as the 'copter plunged straight down, pilotless, to crash with a shudder that shook the concrete pad. Before the wreckage stopped grinding, a twisted tin-can mass of metal now, Solo was racing forward. The open hatch was pinched over on itself.

The THRUSH agent in the homburg had tried to jump clear, hadn't made it, was pinned under folded metal. An edge of this metal cut into the belly of his suit. Solo saw black blood oozing in the starlight.

Starlight, that was all. The lights on Nob Hill had blinked out. The incredible tide of total darkness was sweeping on across San Francisco toward the bridge to Oakland.

The man with the homburg hung head down from the wreckage. His arm with the attache case handcuffed to the wrist dangled free. With a grimace, Illya began working the attache case handle back and forth until it snapped. Solo knelt, peered up inside the wreckage. The two other THRUSH crewmen were invisible, most certainly dead inside all that mangled wire and steel.

Glassy eyed and incoherent, Homburg was cursing, cursing and damning *them*. "Lights all gone," he burbled as a trickle of blood ran out the corner of his mouth. "Couldn't–wait till we got clear. Knew–we were making a run for it but the miserable experiment–"

Napoleon Solo's neck prickled. Illya's eyes shone white and startled as he turned to listen.

"–experiment comes first," the dying man gasped. "THRUSH scientists get–anything they want. They tell a section chief like me–get out of the way. If you don't–you're in hard luck. Experiment already scheduled. They–knew we were making a run. Needed power. I radioed–Needed ten more minutes. But it was all planned. They–couldn't wait. They always–get what they want, the muck-a-mucks–"

And he began to babble a stream of incoherent oaths whose venom was strengthened because the THRUSH agent realized that his life was slipping

quickly away.

"What experiment?" Solo closed his fingers around the man's shoulder. "What experiment did you radio and ask them to stop?"

Homburg made a strange, terrible *arrgh* of pain deep in his throat. His head hung down, cheeks traced with thin black lines of blood. For a moment he stared at Napoleon Solo with clarity and understanding.

Then the dying agent turned his head just a little, peering off into the windswept distance where there was no longer a city of San Francisco, only darkness and a dreadful harmony of automobile horns bleating up the streets below like terrified metal voices.

Homburg turned back to Solo and coughed, "Lights–out. For you–"

More unspeakable cursing. Breath whistled between his teeth. He arched his back, driving the folded metal deeper into his bloody belly. "–your hard luck," he whispered and died.

Napoleon Solo scowled and straightened up. A whiff of smoke tinged with the rancid smell of oil drifted from the helicopter wreckage. The bay bridge to Oakland went dark. Then, on the Oakland side, street after street plunged behind the advancing wall of black.

Not a single light showed anywhere in the entire city of San Francisco. The din of car horns was frightening, pounding on the eardrums. Far up, lined by the last dying beams of the western sun, another huge silver jetliner was arching down into a forced landing.

Solo struggled to grasp the enormity of the threat contained in the envenomed dying words of the section chief. Evidently Homburg had been alerted to a pending experiment which would cancel every volt of electric power in the entire Bay area.

This experiment, coincidentally, had come at the moment when the 'copter needed power to carry its cargo to safety. The section chief had radioed for a delay, been refused. And the 'copter pilot had shot at the U.N.C.L.E. agents, not knowing what his section chief knew and assuming that the men from U.N.C.L.E. had been responsible for the power failure.

As Solo stared out over the darkened city in the wind, the specter of what had happened once when power went out in Manhattan rose to haunt him. The famous blackout had been a terrifying, potentially explosive time. Fortunately the accident had been remedied with reasonable dispatch.

But this incredible domino march of darkness across hundreds of square miles was no accident.

“Lights out,” Illya murmured. There was a strange, worried expression on his face. “He kept repeating it, Napoleon. Did you hear him?”

If THRUSH were truly behind this, Solo thought, then all other THRUSH threats in the past were as nothing by comparison. “I heard him,” Solo said in a hollow voice, and watched the dark swallow the last of Oakland.

ACT I

SHOCKING DEVELOPMENTS AT SPOON FORKS

And so," said Mr. Alexander Waverly, 'the blackout ended?"

Illya Kuryakin nodded. Gray fatigue circles showed beneath his eyes.

"That's right, sir. Precisely thirty minutes after it began. The lights came back on everywhere at once, as far as I could see."

Mr. Waverly rose. He walked around the large motorized circular conference table which occupied the center of the planning room of U.N.C.L.E.'s Operations and Enforcement Section. Banked computers and message information boards blinked their tiny multicolored lights along the walls.

On his way to the window, Mr. Waverly scanned all the random-colored displays, instantly reading in them an orderly, peaceful pattern. The lights, green, amber, muted purple, indicated that all up and down the Eastern seaboard, it was a quiet night.

Yet Waverly's puckered brow suggested anything but enjoyment of the luxury of relative calm.

From one of the deep leather armchairs near the round table, Napoleon Solo regarded his chief with glassy-eyed interest. Solo and Illya hadn't slept since the incident atop the Mark Montfair Hotel a little over twenty-four hours before.

In the aftermath of the blackout, the authorities had been busy, to say the least. There had been minor outbreaks of looting during the darkness. And Solo and Illya were detained briefly until their credentials gave them leave to go.

Because airline schedules had been disrupted, there were further delays at the airport. The agents landed at Kennedy International at the height of Manhattan's twilight rush hour. They proceeded directly towards the East River and the East 44th Street brownstone which was one of the entrances to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

There are four known entrances to the hidden complex of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York. A maze of steel and bombproof concrete hides behind its innocent facade, which includes a tailor shop, the false offices of an international aid organization also called U.N.C.L.E., and a key-club called *The Mask Club*. The stronghold has no stairs, only elevators, and has been penetrated only once.

To those who know, the headquarters can also be entered by water from the river through secret tunnels. The main entrance, however, used by all but the few who can never be seen coming in, is *Del Floria's* tailor shop. An important man in Section-IV of U.N.C.L.E., De Floria is the keeper of the gate. He knows every U.N.C.L.E. member by sight, the only man below Section I who does. He knows their faces and no more.

Getting an all clear signal from Del Floria, Solo and Illya entered the dressing room, closed the curtain. A wall opened, and they stepped through hurriedly as the wall closed fast. They were now in the reception room of U.N.C.L.E. The room was windowless, with no doors. Behind the modern reception desk, an attractive girl was operating controls on the desk top. No button was labeled. Only she knew each identification. Behind her back, in its holster was her U.N.C.L.E. special. The receptionist handed Solo and Illya their triangular identity badges.

At this moment April Dancer and Mark Slate came into the room through a wall panel that suddenly opened. The four U.N.C.L.E. agents exchanged greetings, and Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin stepped through the same panel.

Without their badges, alarms would be clanging, doors closing and sealing. The two men walked past doors which would never open to anyone without the proper signal. There were no windows anywhere. In a silent elevator they rode up two floors, entering into a steel corridor. After passing several doors, they came to a steel one at the end of the corridor which, like all the others, was unmarked. Inside was the heart of U.N.C.L.E. operations in New York, the office of the chief. He was one of only five men who formed Section I–Policy and Operations.

The door opened. Alexander Waverly was deeply worried. Solo could see it. Their chief was at the window, tapping his cold pipe against the sill. Peering at the city lights in that almost cross-eyed way which denoted intense concentration, he murmured, “Strange how man depends on light for security.”

“All things considered,” Solo said, stifling a yawn, “the people in San Francisco behaved very well indeed. It was similar to the situation that happened here in the Manhattan blackout.”

Alexander Waverly nodded. “Yes, I was here when that occurred. Terrifying as it was, it was most heartening in another way.” A wry smile. “It almost led one to believe that the human race was beginning to discover its humanity at last. People were courteous, helpful–” Now Waverly fixed Napoleon Solo with an intense stare. The latter had not fully concealed another gargantuan yawn behind his hand. “Perhaps we are keeping you up, Mr. Solo?”

Solo looked chagrined. On occasion Waverly teased him. That last barb, however, carried no concealed humor. Waverly had simply had one of his infrequent lapses into temper. The lapse cast a new, grim light on the importance Waverly placed on the report which Solo and Illya had just given.

Illya was busy completing a report form in duplicate. He glanced up, said “It’s just that we haven’t been to bed, sir. Or had a decent meal. And on the plane back here, Napoleon remembered that he had a tentative engagement with this spear carrier–” Illya flushed and fiddled with his report.

“An engagement with whom, Mr. Solo?” Waverly inquired.

“Not a spear carrier, sir. A fan carrier. A young lady.” And, ah, what a young lady, he thought, rather wistfully. “She’s a singer , sir. A lyric soprano with the Met. Actually she’s only been with the company since the start of the season. She’s in the chorus. All she gets to do is carry a fan in *Aida*. After the performance tonight, we were going to–”

Mr. Waverly shook his head. “I am afraid your performance has been cancelled. We must concentrate on this new threat posed by the San Francisco blackout.”

So much, thought Solo, for the cultural side of life. He hoped Babette would not hate him too much. “Yes, sir,” he said.

Waverly ticked his pipe against the sill again. “Naturally I watched all the TV reports on the West Coast blackout today. The authorities still assume it was a failure similar to that here in New York.” He waved his pipe. “A massive breakdown.

Illya Kuryakin rose, stretched. He looked wan, tense in the artificial light. “We didn’t hear any reports while we were traveling, of course. Has

any specific source of power failure been discovered?”

“None,” Waverly answered.

Unsuccessfully, Solo had tried to forget the dying THRUSH section chief, hanging head down in the ‘copter’s twisted hatch, bleeding to death and furious with his masters. He had been identified as one Herman Graybar.

“From what Graybar muttered, all THRUSH agents on section chief level and above, had been alerted that this San Francisco experiment was coming.”

“We must be quite certain of one thing,” Waverly said. “The dying man did use the word *experiment*?”

Illya lost no time in affirming it. “Experiment, sir, yes. Conducted, from all we could gather, by some of the higher-level scientific THRUSH personnel. High enough, anyway, so that Graybar’s wish to escape from us was of no concern to them”

Waverly mused, “Of no concern for a good reason. If THRUSH has developed the capability of damping down all electric power in a given area at will–” He paused. “–then gentlemen, you can see the tremendous advantage THRUSH would enjoy. In an accidental blackout, as proved in New York, and in San Francisco with the exception of those few looting incidents, people tended to behave rather well. But imagine a THRUSH planned blackout–”

Waverly spun, waved at the splendor of Manhattan burning in the night outside the window. “Imagine a blackout deliberately engineered to envelop this city on signal. Or the entire East from Boston down to Washington. And then imagine that into this blackout infiltrated trained teams of THRUSH whose specific task it was to set fires. To kill. To create conditions of havoc and panic.

“Not many operatives would be needed. A dozen. THRUSH has ten times that many at its disposal. Given such conditions, the veneer of calm would, I fear, crack and crumble. There would be terror. And with it, violence. Were THRUSH able to mount such a psychological attack upon any nation’s large metro areas, I expect it would not be long before THRUSH had that particular country on its knees, crying for mercy.

Illya said, “Apparently THRUSH now has that capability, sir”

“But on how large a scale?” Waverly asked rhetorically. “Is it limited to an area of a single city? Can it be expanded at will? We must locate the

source of this THRUSH research project, put it out of action at once."

Waverly crossed rapidly to a console. Quickly his fingers tapped a series of colored buttons. As he punched in the combination, he said over his shoulder, "You did deliver the attache case with the courier list to Mr. Narzoomian?"

Illya nodded. Narzoomian was an Operations and Enforcement man whose section specialized in THRUSH narcotics traffic. Waverly muttered, "Good, good; he'll take it from there." A grid on the console lit up.

"Yes, Mr. Waverly?" said a throaty female voice from the grid.

"Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin are no longer on the Pacific Coast assignment."

Waverly punched another of the studs, faced around. "The fact that you two are on personal assignment to me is, as you well know, a euphemism. It means we have no specific clues, no place to search for the nerve center of this newest THRUSH scheme. In fact, I am at a loss to suggest how we can even begin to investigate its scope and seriousness." Waverly pondered. Then

"Well, perhaps for starters, we might consult with Dr. Ruthven and Dr. Kepinsky from the lab. I'll have them run up. They are both specialists in electrical–"

Waverly went white and rigid

Solo shot out of his chair. "Are you ill, sir?"

"No. No." Waverly looked as though a shock of recognition had struck him. He rushed toward his desk, thrust aside a sheaf of sealed documents labeled *A.W., Policy & Operations, Eyes Only.* "No, by heaven, but I have just made a mental connection with something which might–"

His words trailed off as he lifted a thin, plain manila folder and dumped its contents on the conference table. Solo recognized, among other things, a short clipping in the headline and text typeface of *The New York Times*.

"Please wait a moment, gentlemen," Waverly urged, picking up a hand mike. He pressed a button on the mike's underside. "Waverly here, Mr. Jacques. Will you please obtain from Security and Personnel the last regular identification on Harold Bell? That's correct, B, e, double l. No, I do not have his employee number."

Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo exchanged puzzled glances as Waverly continued, "Put a rush on it, please. By the way, Bell is no longer with us. He retired as senior technologist here some two and a half years

ago. The tape should still be on file, though. I want it run as quickly as you can. Thanks very much, Mr. Jacques."

Waverly slammed down the mike, rubbing his hands together almost excitedly. "I don't want to be over-confident, gentlemen. The lead may disintegrate completely. And yet–"

He snatched up the *Times* clipping, re-read it. His eyes were lighted by enthusiasm that showed he was on to something. He mused aloud:

"My father started me very early on the habit of reading newspapers. I now read half a dozen to a dozen a day. At time like this, I thank my father, gentlemen. Back then, I hated the idea. I would have preferred to run outside and play cricket."

Still mystified, Solo said nothing. Waverly's remarkable speed-reading faculty was well known in the U.N.C.L.E. organization, as was his omnivorous attention to details of the newspapers sent to his desk daily from all parts of the country and abroad. Before Solo could ask a single question about what was up, a rheostat controlled in an adjacent chamber took the lights down.

A large acetate map of North and South America slid aside. A screen double the size of the normal TV receiver lit up from black to gray. A title flashed on, the usual code lettering and identification tape.

Every U.N.C.L.E. staff member had his image recorder on such tape, for security reasons. The tapes were re-done every two years.

Against a stark white background, brilliantly lit and lined with height grids, stood a slight, gray-haired man in a dark suit. The man faced the camera. Then he faced left. Then the other way, holding the profile a few seconds each time. Next he faced to the rear. Then front again.

He walked forward toward the camera, his face assuming huge proportions. Solo wondered why all the hoorah. The technologist–what was his name? Bell?–looked thoughtful, harmless, typical of many high-level scientific specialists employed by U.N.C.L.E.

"That's enough, Mr. Jacques, thank you," Waverly called.

The tape blurred to a freeze-frame halt.

The acetate map closed over the screen. The lights brightened.

"That's Harold," Waverly explained. "I wanted you to see him for purposes of identification. He was quite a good friend of mine. A brilliant man and an excellent snooker player who–but never mind that. As I mentioned, Harold reached retirement age a couple of years ago. He and his

wife Maude retired to Maude's part of the country, a little town down in Arkansas with a peculiar name. "What was it? Waverly consulted the *Times* clip. "Spoons Forks."

Illya almost guffawed. "You must be joking, sir."

"The American talent for fascinating peculiar names on towns is limitless, Mr. Kuryakin. I assure you such a town exists. Harold and Maude Bell–she's considerably younger than Harold–have a son. Martin Bell. Just a couple of months ago, Harold brought Maude back here to Manhattan for a little vacation. We had a chance to spend some time together. I had forgotten about Martin, I confess. Harold brought me up to date."

Solo still didn't grasp the significance. Trying to look interested and afraid he was looking dense, he leaned forward as Waverly continued, emphasizing each word, "Harold told me Martin had just entered Bay State Institute of Technology as a first-year student."

"I have respect for him," Illya murmured. "Bay State is a sort of think-factory school which accepts only near-geniuses, if I remember."

"Quite so, Mr. Kuryakin. I was reminded that Martin was indeed a youthful prodigy, and possessor on an I.Q. which some professionals tested out to be very near to two hundred. Harold told me then that Martin's specialty at school was to be electrical field theory. The boy showed an uncanny ability in an area of scientific endeavor which, as I understand, is so highly sophisticated and abstruse as to be practically incomprehensible to the layman."

"Now that in itself, gentlemen, would indicate very little. Except for this."

Waverly took out the clipping again.

"This is an item which I was fortunate enough to note in the *Times*. It is bylined Little Rock. It states that Martin Bell, son of famed technologist Harold Bell of Spoon Forks, disappeared while home from school visiting his parents. Disappeared. Vanished. That article appeared four days ago. A tenuous connection–"

Illya's eyes flickered brightly now. "But one worth following up, sir?"

Waverly picked up a handset. "Precisely. Hello? This is Section One. I want a direct wire to the home of Mr. Harold Bell in Spoon Forks, Arkansas. And scramble, please."

TWO

Twenty minutes later, Solo was still walking back and forth. Some of his tiredness was gone now that the scent of the chase was rising. Illya had left the room to run a check in the data section. He returned, edging up to Napoleon Solo and saying softly:

"Central Records has no information to suggest that THRUSH has any research people currently working and capable of developing the kind of machine or blackout-box or whatever you want to call it that caused the havoc in San Francisco."

"They can't be that short on brains," Solo whispered back.

Illya shrugged. "There are the usual lesser lights. Good, solid technical men–"

"If you care to call murdering fanatics good, solid technical men."

"They have nobody at the moment who could be considered a genius in electrical field theory.

"But it's possible we don't know all of their people.

The conversation was interrupted by a rise in Waverly's voice. He had been murmuring questions and replies into the trumpet-shaped receiver of the phone, but now he said more clearly:

"Yes, Harold, yes. Good to talk with you too. I am sure Martin will turn up. No, I am not sure yet whether U.N.C.L.E. is connected in any way. I will let you know what we decide. Yes, and my best to your wonderful wife. Good-bye."

Waverly hung up. He gripped the phone a moment, the glanced somberly at Illya and Solo.

"You both know me very well. I am not prone to act rashly, or make swift decisions. But in this case–" He erupted from his chair. "Let me tell you what Harold said. Martin left a typewritten note behind when he vanished. It told his parents that the pressures and tensions of life had grown too much for him, that he wished to disappear, not go back to Bay State. Harold thinks the note was a forgery."

"How can he be sure of that, sir?" Illya asked.

"A man is reasonably sure of his own son most of the time, Mr. Kuryakin. Harold told me that his son was simply not the type to call it

quits when things got tough. And particularly not now. Martin informed his parents that he was working on a new project. His enthusiasm for it was practically boundless."

Waverly paused. "On the day before he vanished, Martin described it to his parents as a type of anti-generator. If it proved successful, Martin believed it could completely neutralize millions of volts of electrical power. In fact, he claimed that he believed the device ultimately would be able to control the flow of electrical power within a radius of at least fifty miles."

Tense silence hung in the room. Solo whistled. Finally he said; "Then you're thinking it's a kidnapping?"

"By a little bird?" Illya added.

"By a THRUSH?" Waverly shrugged. "I don't know. I do know that we face a potentially catastrophic threat from that organization, in the form of this blackout device. A device which sounds very similar to the one Martin Bell was working on. I think it is worth my sending you both to talk with Harold Bell. And immediately. We will use the turbojet at the field on Long Island. You can be airborne in an hour."

Napoleon Solo's nerves tightened up a notch. "Spoon Forks, Arkansas?"

"I still don't believe it," Illya said.

You had better believe it," said Mr. Alexander Waverly, with one meaningful glance toward the window and the city beyond, where millions of twinkling lights held the darkness at bay.

A yellow hound crawled out from under a spirea bush and bayed belligerently as the black sedan swung round the corner into the tree-shadowed stillness of Oleander Street.

Napoleon Solo was at the wheel. He looked refreshed and dapper in a powder blue blazer and old school tie which had already caused a few elevated eyebrows among the locals.

They had picked up the high-powered car from an U.N.C.L.E. courier waiting at the Little Rock airport. The drive consumed just under ninety minutes. They arrived in Spoon Forks (pop. 1,800) around nine, and drove up the main street, where farmers in overalls lounged on the curb and glared suspiciously at the neatly-dressed outlanders. Even the local pets seemed suspicious. The yellow dog was running along the car now, snarling and snapping at the glittering spinner hubcaps.

Solo grimaced. "Actually what were those grits with breakfast at the airport? My stomach is dancing a jig." He made a face and started to

whistle *Dixie*.

Illya craned forward. It was a hot, sunny morning. The houses on Oleander Street were large, on heavily-shrubbed lots, and mostly painted white. A telephone pole slid past. It bore a gaudy poster announcing that *Crackerby's Combined* Shows *& Mammoth Motorized Midway* would be ensconced at the Spoon Forks County Fairgrounds for one week. Illya Kuryakin noted this as he noted all other details, automatically and professionally. Then he continued to count house numbers. Finally he indicated a three-story frame place coming up on the left.

"Number one hundred twenty-nine. There."

"And some company is here ahead of us," Solo said.

A drab gray sedan was parked in the drive. Two men lounged in the rear seat. One put down a newspaper he had been reading. Both gave the car suspicious stares as Napoleon Solo swung into the curb and parked.

Solo patted his left pocket to make sure his rod-shaped communicator was ready if he needed it. In specially-sewn inner pockets of the blazer reposed the mechanism, barrel and silencing-baffle tube for his pistol. The palms of his hands began to prickle as he and Illya got out and went up the front walk of Number 129.

In the rear of the gray sedan the two nondescripts in fedoras continued to regard the new arrivals with unfriendly curiosity.

A third stranger heaved himself up from a creaking metal and canvas glider on the spacious front porch. This man was big, bulky, with a neck fat dribbling over the collar of his nylon shirt. He wore an ill-fitting mass-produced suit, a summer hat. In between was a chunky face with a lumpy nose and downturned mouth. His expression was not openly hostile. But neither did the man flash a smile of brotherhood.

His big, formidable-looking frame barred the path of the U.N.C.L.E. agents at the top of the porch steps.

"The folks inside don't want any magazines," he rumbled. "try next door."

"Perhaps you'd let Mr. and Mrs. Bell tell us that," Solo said, already nettled.

"We are not selling magazines in any case," Illya added.

The burly man scowled at Illya's accent. "Nobody allowed on these premises except on official business. Especially nobody with a foreign accent."

An angry flush rose up in Illya's cheeks. Solo laid a hand on his companion's arm, put his other hand inside his jacket. The burly man tensed, hands edging upward towards his lapels. Behind him, Solo heard the doors of the gray sedan chunk softly shut.

Carefully, so as not to provoke a shooting match, Napoleon Solo pulled out his credentials. He flipped the case open to show the stranger the triangular identification that was known worldwide.

He said, "Napoleon Solo, United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. And if you don't have better credentials than that mister, you're in trouble."

The burly man lost a little of his hostility, produced his own shabby identification case. "Sorry. The Bells did say two of you guys were on the way. But I didn't expect a couple of over-aged college boys." The man smiled, about as mirthfully as a cobra. "Felix Corrigan's the name."

Illya handed back the card case. "Yes, it says that beneath your picture."

Corrigan eyed Solo's blue blazer distastefully. His raw envy was badly concealed.

Solo said, "Do you mind telling me, Mr. Corrigan, why one of the top counter-intelligence bureaus in the Federal Government assigned men to this case?"

Corrigan shrugged, but showed no disposition to move from the head of the steps. "All I do is follow orders. I guess it's because the government keeps tabs on all the scientific bright boys. You never know," he added with a dark glance at Illya, "when a foreign power might snatch one of these kids and carry him off the Lord knows where. My men and me were sent here to cooperate with the local authorities, follow up on the case."

"How long have you been here?"Illya asked.

"Since the day after the boy disappeared out at the fairgrounds."

Solo's right eyebrow hooked up. "Fairgrounds?"

A fat thumb pointed into space.

Didn't you see those posters plastered all over town?" A carnival's playing here this week. Martin Bell went out to the county Fairgrounds right after supper the night he disappeared. He was supposed to meet his girl there. She works in a bank on Main Street.

"Well, when she arrived, the kid didn't meet her where he was supposed to. Nobody's seen him since. The girl's inside visiting with his folks right

now, by the way. The old man discovered the kid's typewritten farewell note later that night when he went up to the boy's bedroom to look around."

Suddenly Corrigan's eyes seemed to lose their glitter, flatten out. "I don't why I bother to tell you all this. U.N.C.L.E.'s never given our bureau much cooperation. You can get all you need to know from Mr. and Mrs. Bell." Corrigan waved at the gray sedan. "Cool it, you guys. These are the prep school kids from U.N.C.L.E."

Struggling to control an intense dislike for this strangely hostile U.S. public servant, Solo asked, "What luck have the local police had?"

Corrigan shrugged once more. "Afraid they haven't had a bit. The kid just disappeared, *poof*, like that."

Illya and Solo exchanged dubious glances. Solo started up the steps. Corrigan reached for the old-fashioned bell twist.

"I'll just go along inside and introduce you–"

"No thanks, Mr. Corrigan," said Solo dropping his hand on the bell-twist a second ahead of Corrigan's big paw.

Corrigan drew back, furrow-browed, suspicious. "What kind of routine is this?"

Illya said, "We prefer to talk to the Bell's privately."

You're right, we really aren't very cooperative at all," Solo smiled, and gave the bell-twist a turn.

"Well, I'll be a–"

Corrigan uttered a short, sharp, anti-social word, turned around and clumped off the porch. He was last seen conferring furtively with his two fellow counter-espionage agents over by the gray sedan. Solo watched them carefully.

"You know, Napoleon," Illya whispered, "I have met quite a few men who work for U.S. intelligence. None has ever been quite so thick witted or shabby looking."

Solo scratched his chin. "Right. There are a few lemons, of course. But most of them are long on brains and good manners. They don't work for starvation wages and waltz around in bargain-basement suits. Either Corrigan is strictly a loser, picked to come out here because the case is already a foregone dead end, or he's the biggest, phoniest imitation of a Federal employee I've ever–"

"Oh, hello," said a warm female voice on the other side of the screen. "You must be the two gentlemen Alexander Waverly phoned to tell us

about.”

Solo put on his most winning smile. “Mrs. Bell? Napoleon Solo. May I say it’s a pleasure to be called a gentleman for a change. Mr. Corrigan thinks otherwise.”

Mrs. Maude Bell held the screen door open for them. “That federal man? I don’t care for him. He’s done nothing but ask questions and sit on the porch.”

Mrs. Bell was a petite brown-haired woman. She wore a print dress. Her speech was not a bucolic drawl. Solo noted that her hairdo was decidedly stylish.

“I was just fixing some iced tea for Harold and Beth. Come right this way. We’ve been sitting on the side porch because it’s so muggy already.”

As they proceeded through the cool, dim, old-fashioned parlor Solo performed the amenities, introducing Illya to Martin Bell’s mother. The amenities were repeated on the side porch, which was full of rattan furniture and screened on three sides.

Harold Bell was as slight, gray-haired and unassuming as he had appeared on video tape. He welcomed them warmly, said, “Mr. Solo? Mr. Kuryakin? Let me present Miss Beth Andrews.”

Napoleon Solo was not customarily inclined to whistle at girls. He had seen too many, in too many svelte and stunning shapes, sizes, and colors, to be easily impressed. But Beth Andrews was something special.

She was no older than eighteen, a brunette with a shining complexion, large intelligent blue eyes, and that kind of clean-scrubbed yet sensuous beauty which bowled over beauty pageant judges and infuriated women from other countries.

“Our pleasure,” Solo said with a smile. Illya carried it a little far, Solo thought. He bent over her hand and kissed it with a murmured, “Charmed, my dear, charmed.”

Beth Andrews clearly had other matters on her mind. Her polite smile faded quickly as she said:

“When Mr. Bell phoned this morning and told me that his old friend Mr. Waverly of U.N.C.L.E. was sending two of his best men to investigate, I nearly cried for joy. I know you’ll find Martin. And I think it’s wonderful of Mr. Waverly to send you here just because Martin’s father used to work–”

Shaking his head, Harold Bell interrupted, “Alexander Waverly couldn’t possibly send his two top agents to help an old friend, Beth, just for

friendship's sake. That is contrary to U.N.C.L.E.'s policy. So I assume, Mr. Solo, that Martin's disappearance is somehow connected with something else. Some case you're working on?"

With a quick nod, Solo accepted the frosty glass of tea Maude Bell had just brought in on a tray.

I have to ask all of you to hold this in confidence," he said after a sip. And then he told them, with interpolations and additions by Illya, of their experiences in San Francisco. At the end he briefly sketched in the speculations by Mr. Waverly which had led up to their presence here.

"The blackout!" Maude Bell said softly. "Of course we heard about it on the news. But I never imagined Martin could be in any way connected with it."

Harold bell jumped up from his rattan chair. "But it makes sense, Maude. Don't you see how much sense it makes? Much more than Martin giving in to pressure, tension. I've said it before. He isn't that kind. So if it's true that Martin was kidnapped from the fairgrounds–"

"No one really knows for certain," Beth explained. "The town police found one concession stand operator who thought he'd seen Martin on the grounds, but we don't know anything else."

"I see what Harold means," Maude Bell spoke, eagerly now. "If Martin was kidnapped by this secret organization–"

Quietly Illya said, "THRUSH is it's name. Power-mad fanatics bent on destroying the peace of the world and substituting their rule for that of all other governments."

"If Martin's in their hands," Mrs. Bell insisted, "at least he's alive."

Napoleon Solo did not want to express his grim doubt. Instead he said reassuringly, "That's probably so, Mrs. Bell." He rose, set his empty ice tea glass on a tray. "I think it would be wise if Illya and I went to the Fairgrounds immediately. The carnival is still playing there?"

Beth Andrews' hair caught angled sunbeams as she nodded. "It arrived Sunday and stays until Saturday, the day after tomorrow."

Solo gave a crisp nod and headed out through the parlor. He and Illya murmured more words of professional reassurance. Both Mr. and Mrs. Bell pumped their hands and expressed fervent thanks. Beth Andrews watched with a radiant expression as Solo pushed against the front screen and started briskly across the porch.

He wished he could be as confident as those three people seemed.

The head of Felix Corrigan popped suddenly into view behind a large bush near the porch. Solo started, nearly went for his gun. Corrigan smiled, showing several gold inlays as he straightened up from tying his shoe.

You two in a hurry to get somewhere?" he inquired.

"We're going to the Fairgrounds, where Martin Bell was last seen," Illya said coolly.

Corrigan pinched the bridge of his nose. "That area's been covered pretty thoroughly. But if you think you can turn up something new, what say I ride along?"

Napoleon Solo sighed. "All right, Corrigan, come on. Just no more remarks about prep school."

"The U.S. is supposed to be a friendly country," Illya said.

The laugh in Corrigan's throat was hearty but false. He conferred quickly with his two aides still lounging in the gray sedan, then dog-trotted along after the U.N.C.L.E. agents and climbed into the back of the black sedan. In three minutes, with Solo tooling the souped-up machine just within the legal speed limits, they had left Spoon Forks proper and were passing swiftly down a simmering asphalt road past a large billboard pointing the way to the Fairgrounds.

A couple of garish neo-Hollywood hamburger stands whipped by. Then several shacks and a dilapidated filling station. Illya noted a very large tan-colored van sitting in the shade at the side of the station. As the black sedan passed the unmarked van revved its engines. Watching the rear view mirror, Solo saw the van careen at top speed, on to the asphalt behind them.

"Unless the local constabulary travels in unmarked trucks," he said, "we're in trouble."

Solo floored the gas pedal. The high-powered engine under the hood whined faintly and the sedan leaped ahead. Rows of corn whipped by on both sides like a blurred camera flashpan. Illya and Corrigan screwed around to watch the van come arrowing up the straight, deserted country road, gaining, steadily gaining.

"Maybe it's just some hick speeding," Corrigan said.

"Napoleon!" Illya said, the corners of his mouth white. "Check your mirror. The van's headlights just revolved and disappeared."

Solo's eyes flicked up to the mirror's oval. Illya had faced front again, was swiftly screwing together the parts of his pistol.

Where the van's left and right headlight ports had been before now loomed a pair of round, black, muzzle-like openings.

The black sedan was inching up from seventy-five to eighty miles an hour as Solo held on to the wheel hard, tightly. The big van had stopped trying to gain on them, was matching their speed and staying eight to ten car lengths behind. In the rear seat Corrigan fanned himself frantically with his fedora and burbled incoherent remarks about something being crazy about all this.

"Just in case," Illya breathed, checking his assembled pistol. He was interrupted by a sudden, softly-thundering *chuff-chuff* from behind.

In the mirror Solo saw gouts of flame and white smoke belch from the round openings in the front of the van. *"Rockets!"* He spun the steering wheel wildly to the right.

With a lurch the black sedan hit the shoulder. Solo straightened the car out, trying to keep it from hurtling into the ditch as the two missiles sped down the center of the highway with an eerie whine. Seconds later the rockets hit a slight rise in the road. There were two tremendous explosions. Columns of white smoke shot skyward.

Solo watched the speedometer. Still at eighty. He was having the devil's own time steering. He shot the sedan back into the center of the road, then whipped the wheel alternately left and right, so that the sedan S-curved, tires screaming.

Illya leaned from the right window. Snapped off a shot to the rear, another. *Chuff-chuff.* The van's rocket ports belched again.

Solo's cheeks ran with sweat. He aimed the sedan's hood at the left shoulder and floored the pedal. The rockets streaked by, whining and leaving trails of smoke. This time the angle of aim had been slightly different. The missiles plowed into a tobacco field and erupted thunderously, flinging dirt high.

The sedan was roaring down the left shoulder now, Solo still fighting for control again. Another loud report–

"Blowout!" he yelled as the sedan's left front tire went, probably ripped by a rock.

They were heading straight for the ditch.

Solo let up on the accelerator, fought to maintain a steady course. Illya leaned from the right window, pistol chattering.

The dun-colored van raced up behind them just as the sedan started to nosedive into the ditch. Illya saw two men riding in the cab, managed to get in one more shot.

The world spun. Solo heard a faint metallic whang, then Illya's oath of disgust. "Dented their rear bumper, that's all."

The black sedan plowed down into the dirt. To slow their velocity, Solo slammed the brake pedal. The sedan bounded up the other side, front right wheels high in the air. These came down with a tremendous crash. Solo's head flew against the windshield. Colored patterns danced behind his eyes.

Moments later the U.N.C.L.E. agents, aching but alive, crawled out of the twisted wreck of the sedan and pulled Felix Corrigan after them. Corrigan looked too shocked and shaken to speak. Steam rose from the car's crumpled radiator, obscuring the highway. Solo shook the fog out of his head. He climbed the shoulder in the sweltering sun and peered ahead down the heat-hazed asphalt.

The oversized dun-colored van had vanished. All that remained to mark the incident were two smouldering holes, each about two feet across, where the road crested about half a mile ahead.

Solo lurched back down into the grass, dabbing with a handkerchief at a bloodied bruise on his forehead.

"I don't know much about the wildlife of Arkansas," Solo said, "but there is at least one THRUSH in this neck of the woods."

Felix Corrigan goggled. "Thrush? What's going on? I don't understand–"

"Don't try." Disgusted, Illya stood up. He peered up the road. "Well, Napoleon, we'll simply have to walk to the Fairgrounds if we're going to try to catch the brass ring."

With a grim nod Solo said, "Before it catches us. Come on."

Three

The Spoon Forks county fairgrounds shimmered in the heat. A small breeze rippled canvas tent flaps here and there. Solo, Illya and Felix Corrigan entered the gate and stopped, surveying the scene.

Ahead, deserted concession tents receded into the distance along both sides of a dusty avenue. Kewpie dolls and stuffed animals on the prize shelves of the little tents stared at nothing, at silence, at emptiness. Solo

consulted his watch. Apparently Crackerby's Combined Shows & Mammoth Motorized Midway did not open for business until noon at least. The whole area had an air of eerie desolation.

Up a sparsely-shaded hill to the left the U.N.C.L.E. agents noted a group of carny roustabouts drinking beer and playing cards in their undershirts. Behind the concession tents white-painted, green-roofed grandstand loomed. Two attendants were sweeping out yesterday's debris with push brooms.

A couple of tough-looking girls in satin jackets drifted around the corner of one of the small tents and began arranging lead-weighted milk bottles and racks of baseballs. One of the girls whistled at the three men, laughed when Solo whistled back.

To the right, past the ramshackle Agricultural Pavilion, the steel-and-light-bulb skeletons of an inactive ferris wheel, loop-the-loop and child-sized roller coaster stood out against the blazing blue sky. The faded pennons on a merry-go-round flapped. An empty popcorn box went blowing past the polished tips of Solo's $70 hand-lasted shoes.

"That's showbiz," Solo said, indicating he grounds with a gesture. "Glittering glamour all the way."

Not very sinister looking, is it?" Illya commented. "Where do we start?"

Solo shielded his eyes against the sun. "Let's just drift around for a few minutes."

Felix Corrigan massaged his cheeks and jowls with an oversized linen handkerchief. "If you fellas don't mind, that shooting on the road kind of shook me up. I'd like to find a tree and sit down in the shade for a few moments. I'll see you later."

Solo's smile flashed wide. "Splendid idea, Felix. Rest all you want."

"We've been over this ground a dozen times with the local authorities," Corrigan complained as he started away. "We really have. I bet you two won't find a thing."

"Probably not," Solo answered, grin fixed in place. "But we're beavers for effort."

With another mutter Corrigan trudged away to the left, wandering up the brown grass on the hillside and slumping down under a tree near the card players. He pulled his fedora down over his eyes. Solo watched the proceedings with cold-eyed amusement.

Illya stuck his tongue in his cheek. “If that man is a top-level agent, I’m Lady Godiva.”

“And I’m Lady Godiva’s horse. He couldn’t be that incompetent. Could he?”

“He didn’t ask a single question about the truck that attacked us,” Illya said as they started down the midway between the tents full of kewpies and ring-toss games. “Beyond burbling a few generalities to indicate his surprise, he didn’t seem the least bit interested. Alarmed, but not interested. What do you think it means, Napoleon?”

Solo shrugged, cutting right between two tents toward the area where the shut-down rides loomed. They passed the gaudily painted facade of DR.WINSTON’S HORRIFIC HOUSE OF THRILLS: *Admission 25 cents.* A fat lady fiddling with the microphone at the barker’s stand gave them a vacant stare.

Solo said, “It either means Corrigan is a loser, draws dead-end assignments like Spoon Forks, or–”

At that point Solo bit off the sentence. He had been thinking aloud, uncertain. Was Corrigan overplaying a part? In the past Solo and Illya had occasionally encountered operatives of the other side who were new to a station, a country, an assignment. Usually these operatives gave themselves away by overplaying their cover role. Of course they didn’t last long on the job. If U.N.C.L.E. didn’t finish them off, their masters did.

This enigma of Corrigan did nothing to settle Solo’s nerves. And he disliked the dead, forlorn atmosphere of the carnival grounds. He and Illya passed the monster ferris wheel and approached the front of CONGRESS OF THE UNUSUAL–*15 Freaks and Startling Oddities 15.*

A series of rain-faded canvas posters was strung out along the tent’s front. These depicted a bearded lady, a sword swallower, a fire eater, Philo the Amazing Frog-boy and other bizarre amusements. But it was toward a poster second from the left that Napoleon was staring raptly. The poster’s colors looked fresher, less faded than the rest. The poster depicted a fierce-looking, round-eyed wizard in formal attire. The painted gentleman stared out hypnotically at the midway, hands extended and fingers spread in a Svengali-like gesture. Behind the painted figure there were images of various pieces of phony-looking electrical apparatus.

What struck Solo, jogged a haunting memory in his mind, were the figure’s bright blue-marble eyes and disorderly shock of reddish hair.

The gentleman was according to the poster legend, DR. A.C. CURRANT–*Secrets of Cosmic Electro-energy Revealed! Can a human being absorb 150,000 volts and live?*

Illya noticed the concentration. What's wrong, Napoleon?"

"Look at the poster for Dr. Currant. It's newer than the rest! And that crazy face almost looks like a caricature of someone I'm sure I've seen before."

Solo closed his eyes. In his mind little black photos went clicking along one after another. At last he concentrated on one, held it. The features were indistinct, but he was able to see the shock of carrot-colored hair and the pale slightly maniacal eyes.

Solo saw them as they existed on microfilm identification in U.N.C.L.E. files. The sound of him snapping his fingers was like a shot.

"Volta!"

"Volta?" Illya echoed, still in the dark.

"Let me see whether I can get the rest of it. Yes! Dr. Leonidas Volta. He was reported killed at a research station in Iceland a year ago. I remember reading the report, noticing the I.D. shots. Illya, if that poster isn't a picture of one of THEUSH's top research people–and one of the nastiest, as I recall–then I'm not only Lady Godiva's steed, I'm its nether end. His specialty was electrical research.

Illya said, "And you think Volta is really alive? Might have joined the carnival under an assumed name in order to be with the show when it played the town where Martin Bell was vacationing?"

"Stranger things have happened." All at once the dead, deserted midway folded an atmosphere of danger, hidden threat, close around them. "Particularly since THRUSH has virtually unlimited funds, can buy or bribe its way in practically anywhere. Come on. Let's see whether Dr. Currant is still with the show. I'll bet you a month's expense account he isn't."

Now Illya's eyes flicked over the deserted sideshow tent. Solo crept around to the side. Illya followed. In a moment both agents had unlimbered their pistols, held them at the ready.

Cautiously Solo peeked around the big tent's rear corner. He saw a jumble of large and small house trailers parked every which way. A small sign over the door of one said *Philo the Frog-boy.* Inside, a radio played country music.

Solo and Illya stole forward again, down the chromed side of the nearest trailer. They circled around the Frog-boys domicile. From the window a curious croaking drifted out along with the recorded guitars. Then Solo pulled up short, pointing with his pistol muzzle.

Directly ahead was a blue-painted house trailer with the legend DR. A.C. CURRANT, *Practitioner of Electro-physical Marvels* painted gaudily along one side. The blinds were carefully drawn.

Once more Solo started forward. But this time it was Illya who did the double-take. He had just spotted something large, dun-colored looming behind Currant's mobile home. With Solo at his side, Illya crept along past Currant's trailer until both the U.N.C.L.E. agents saw a sight that made them literally catch their breaths.

A service road from the far side of the Fairgrounds led up to the rear of the trailer area. Parked near the trailers at the head of this service road, cab empty, stood a large dun-colored van. The headlights caught sun, reflected it in silver dazzles. Except for the absence of the front-end rocket ports, it was the van that had attacked them on the road.

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents had worked together long enough to require no words now. Illya led the way, cat-footing down alongside the van and around to the rear. His mouth quirked. He used the muzzle of his gun to tap the rear bumper.

The bumper still showed the deep indentation of Illya's bullet.

Solo and Illya stole back to the van's head end. Solo pressed his palm over the motor cowl.

"Still warm. I suggest we pay a surprise visit to Dr. Currant's–"

"There you are! Thought I'd never find you!"

The voice boomed. Solo spun around, dropping into a crouch as his finger constricted on the trigger. He just managed to check the pull a second before actually shooting.

Illya Kuryakin scowled. Felix Corrigan had come up behind them around the corner of another of the trailers.

"Sneaking up on that way almost cost the U.S. government an accident insurance claim, you utter idiot," Illya whispered.

"What do you mean? Hell, I was just–"

"Keep your voice down!" Solo rapped out. "We think there's a chance that some of the people responsible for Martin's disappearance may be in there." He indicated Currant's trailer. "Or at least it's their headquarters.

This, in case you aren't capable of recognizing it–" Solo patted the side of the dun-colored van in whose shadow they crouched. "–is the truck that fired at us on the highway."

It's wrong, Solo was thinking. *It's all wrong.*

The burly Federal man blinked, surveyed the drawn blinds of Currant's trailer, shook his head.

"If you're going in there, Solo, we need more men. Let's go back to the gate. I'll telephone my boys at Bell's place. They can be here in ten minutes."

"Not necessary," Solo said. His face had turned stony, emotionless. "Let's go."

Corrigan caught Solo's arm. "Wait! We haven't got enough men, I tell you. You listen to me! I'm in charge of this investigation!"

Very quietly, Solo said, "You're not in charge of anything, Corrigan, except trying to bollix us up."

There was a quick, ugly flash in Corrigan's eyes, instantly hidden. Solo felt that the time for game-playing had ended:

"No Federal agent I've ever met has been as stupid as you pretend to be, Corrigan. You're overplaying." Abruptly he jammed the muzzle of his pistol into Corrigan's midsection. "Maybe that's because you're running a rear-guard team whose job it is to see no one picks up the trail of Martin Bell's kidnappers. Would that team be from THRUSH, perhaps?"

Like melting wax Felix Corrigan's face changed. Illya shouted, "Napoleon! Watch out!"

Corrigan brought a powerhouse knee up into Solo's groin. The blow doubled Solo, sent him smashing against the side of the dun-colored van. Before Illya could shoot, Corrigan snatched up a handful of midway dust and threw it straight in Illya's eyes.

Illya was blinded. Losing all traces of lethargy, Felix Corrigan raced back around the corner of the van.

As Solo straightened up, he caught a glimpse of Corrigan pulling out a pocket transmitter as he darted out of sight.

In the stillness of the carnival grounds, Corrigan's voice cracked out loudly, sharply. He was hiding behind the van and signaling, "Blue signal. All agents. Repeat, all agents. Shoot to kill. Shoot to kill U.N.C.L.E."

ACT II

ROCKET TO DOOMSDAY

A hand, Corrigan's, popped around the rear corner of the oversize van. In that hand was a pistol with an immense snout. Napoleon Solo saw that the pistol which Corrigan aimed would take Illya's head off with its first shot. Solo dived.

He hit Illya at the knees, knocking him into the dirt. Corrigan's pistol burped. Something went *plop* against the van's side, where Illya's head had been a moment before.

White smoke frothed up from the point of impact. A hole appeared in the solid steel of the van. The hole fumed and hissed at the edges. It widened swiftly, three inches across, now six, now nine–

"Acid bullets!" Solo breathed.

Scrambling away from Illya, he jammed his right elbow into the dust and triggered a shot at Corrigan's left foot, which was sticking around the end of the van. He fired again. Not hit, Corrigan jerked his foot back out of the way in time.

Up the service road raced a shabby gray sedan which Solo had seen before. Footfalls also hammered behind them, moving in between the tents. Out on the midway a woman's voice demanded to know what in profanity was happening. A shot cracked. The woman's cry burbled into a wounded scream of pain.

Illya had regained his feet. He braced himself against the van wall, just beneath the huge hole eaten by the acid from Corrigan's gun. Illya's pistol popped softly twice. The left front tire of the approaching sedan blew apart.

The sedan wheeled over and crashed into a tree, but not before a quartet of THRUSH agents had leaped free, guns popping. Bullets chewed up the dust at Solo's feet as he dragged on Illya's sleeve.

"We'll have a better chance back in among the trailers," he said, giving Illya a sudden shove as Corrigan leaped into sight again. The U.N.C.L.E. agents raced into strategic retreat a second before Corrigan's next projectile hit the van fender and ate it half away.

Solo and Illya pounded into the temporary cover afforded by Currant's trailer. In Solo's mind flickered a ghastly picture of an U.N.C.L.E. agent who had once been struck in the face by the splatter from a THRUSH acid projectile. The man had died shrieking, flesh and cartilage eaten away down to the cheekbones.

Solo and Illya crouched on the far side of the deserted Currant trailer, listening. Footsteps slithered through the dust. To their rear Philo the Frog-boy croaked unintelligible syllables of alarm. His voice faded rapidly. Suddenly two men raced into view at the front end of Currant's trailer, turning to fire at the crouched agents.

Illya shot with teeth bared. Solo's shot blended with his. The first THRUSH agent was bowled backwards into the second, both out of action.

Swiftly Solo checked the loads in his pistol. The outlook was not encouraging. "If those two came from the midway, that still leaves at least four of them. Plus Corrigan."

"We can play ring-around-roses for an hour in this maze without getting another one of them," Illya whispered back. "And that will give them time to bring up more reinforcements."

Solo wiped a trickle of perspiration from the point of his chin. Out among the trailers footfalls shuffled again, stealthily, ominous.

"Make some noise," Solo said. "Sound like two of us. I'll try to get at them from another angle." He ripped off his powder blue blazer, jammed his pistol into his belt and leaped high.

His fingers caught the edge of the roof of Dr. Currant's empty trailer. Kicking up a leg, Solo pulled himself up onto the blistering-hot corrugated metal of the top. He inched forward on his belly, in the direction of the dun-colored van.

Peering down into the dirt aisles around the trailer, he saw nothing moving. Just across the way acid continued to eat into the fender of the van. Solo was watching that when a flicker of motion to the left caught his eye.

Immediately Illya began to rattle off shots. That saved Solo's life.

One of the Thrushmen had jumped up from a hiding place inside the van cab, sighted Solo, leaned from the left window to take aim. The sudden flurry of firing from Illya distracted him just enough. The THRUSH slug spanged and ate roof metal two inches from Solo's cheek. Flecks of it bit into his skin, stinging hellishly.

Solo fired back. The Thrushman in the cab howled and flopped down across the cab's window, half in and half out but all dead.

Three left now, plus Corrigan, Solo thought.

His flesh was beginning to roast against the sun-heated metal of the trailer roof. Suddenly two of the THRUSH agents leaped into the open at the rear of the van. They sent a stream of bullets toward Illya's position. Solo took fast aim, quickly checked his shot. From his vantage point he could see the strategy.

Corrigan and the other agent were stealing down the other side of the van, intent on taking Illya by surprise. Solo pumped shots at the other Thrushmen, the ones staging the diversion, and shouted, "Flankers coming up to port, Illya!"

Solo's bullet downed one THRUSH agent. The other dashed forward, into the protection of Currant's trailer, below on Solo's right. Below on Solo's left, Illya had spotted Corrigan and his companion. Illya's gun popped and spurted. Corrigan, looking anything but the inept bungler now, hit the dirt.

Illya's bullet caught the second Thrushman in the stomach, spun him away dead. But Corrigan was up and running again, his murderous acid-firing gun at the ready.

Illya fired again, missed. Corrigan danced along like a broken-field runner, zig-zagging. Solo took aim, was a second slow. Corrigan disappeared down to Solo's left. Suddenly there was a loud, wicked thud.

Illya groaned, groaned again. Solo started to crawl toward that side of the trailer roof so he could fire downward, help Illya. What was Corrigan doing? It sounded as though he were beating the U.N.C.L.E. agent, swarming all over him, not shooting.

What Corrigan was doing became lethally clear in seconds, as the THRUSH agent lunged into sight again, running back toward the dun-colored van with Illya slung over his shoulder. Illya's temple showed a huge, murderous bruise. He flailed, kicked feebly. But Corrigan had him.

Midway to the van, just as Solo heard somebody scrambling up the right side of Currant's van–the other Thrushman who had hidden down there–Corrigan turned and emptied his mammoth pistol at the front edge of the roof where Solo lay.

The acid projectiles , four of them, plowed into the front edge of the roof. White smoke billowed. Solo rolled frantically backwards, covering his

face with his arms. If he got a dollop of that stuff on his skin he was finished.

The whole front end of the trailer seethed. So did the front wall, all of it buckling, dissolving into a lethal cauldron of bubbles and smoke. The roof tilted sickeningly in that direction.

Solo started to slide forward, realized with alarm that the acid bullets had so weakened the trailer that the whole front end had become a death-trap. With the front walls eaten away from beneath, the roof was giving under his weight. He was sliding into the fuming acid-bath walls at the trailer's front.

Wildly he flung out his left hand, tried to grab the corrugations of the roof, hold himself back. The metal was scorching hot. Solo's fingertips came alive with pain. The roof gave another lurch. Solo was practically hanging head downward over an immense hole where the front of the roof had been. Directly below, the floor of the trailer was dissolving into hissing, smoking ruin.

As if Solo didn't have his hands full enough, the remaining Thrushman chose that moment to pull himself up to the right-hand edge of the roof and throw his leg over for support. Hanging there by an arm and a leg, he brought his gun hand over. The muzzle pointed right between Solo's eyes.

It was a nightmare for Solo: he slipped inexorably downward again, on his belly and helpless. He kicked out with his left leg. He managed to hook his toe over the left edge of the roof behind him. The face of the THRUSH agent loomed, slick with sweat. The agent grinned like a skull as he steadied his gun hand.

Time seemed to stop. The agent's trigger finger turned white.

Whiter.

Then Napoleon Solo took the kind of chance for which he had trained.

He still had his pistol in his right hand. He had been digging the butt hard against the roof corrugations to help stop his slide forward into the acid. In a split second he jerked his right hand up and fired.

The THRUSH agent fired back. Solo's head would have been spattered away by the THRUSH bullet if his toe hadn't slipped free. He began to slide faster down the tilting roof, straight into the gaping hole where the acid smoked and hissed.

Solo's shot had missed. The Thrushman dragged himself higher on the roof edge, aiming. Solo was sliding fast, but his mind and his muscles had

been schooled to respond almost without thought. Even though he was sliding, he fired once again. The Thrushman screamed, mortally wounded. He flung his arms forward. One struck Solo's cheek. Solo let go of his pistol and grabbed.

Wildly he hung on to the THRUSH agent's wrist. The Thrushman's lower body had jolted off its precarious purchase on the roof edge. The dead man's legs flopped down against the trailer's side. And it was this sudden force of counterweight which stopped Napoleon Solo's slide, just when his shoetips had slipped over the edge of the eaten-away hole.

Solo's arms ached in their sockets. But he hung on.

He hung on and, by virtue of his superb conditioning, managed to stretch his right hand out far enough to grip the roof's edge with his left. Slowly, agonizingly, he dragged himself over until he could flop off the edge and let the blessed pull of gravity tug him down to earth.

In mid-air Solo tried to twist so that he would fall properly. He miscalculated. His left ankle corkscrewed under him. He sprawled, chewing a mouthful of tan dust. Solo's ears filled with a frightening high-power whirr of electric motors. He screwed his head around.

The acid-eaten dun steel walls of the big van were slowly folding back upon themselves. In the center of the van's rear bed, the steel of some kind of double track began to untelescope from its bed.

The track extended up and outward at an angle of about forty-five degrees. At the base of this track, nestled in massive padded rockers, was a short, stub-winged missile plane. The needle-nosed craft had a round black rear end that showed the scorch marks of after-burning.

Solo tried to rise, but he was weak from the struggle. He fell down again, breathing hard. His pistol was gone. Abruptly, lined against the junction of brassy blue sky and the sweep of the little missile plane's see-through cowl, Corrigan reared up.

Illya was still slung over his shoulder like a meal sack, and showed practically no fight now. A second bruise, this one oozing blood, marked Illya's other temple.

Corrigan's movements were lithe, trained. He slapped against the cowl with the butt of his free hand. It flipped backwards on a hinge. Corrigan dumped Illya into the rear of the cockpit, then jumped into a forward seat.

A few feet away, Solo saw a revolver in the dust. Dropped by one of the THRUSH agents? He started to crawl toward it.

Corrigan glanced back over his shoulder. He half rose in the cockpit of the stub-nosed missile plane. Gone was his whining tone.

“You won’t be quick enough, my U.N.C.L.E. friend. I’ll be off before you pick that gun up. I’m taking your friend Kuryakin along. We have Martin Bell. We are keeping him alive to utilize his talents for the benefit of THRUSH. So we can’t kill him, can we? Go on, Solo, crawl! You’ll never make it in time.”

Corrigan’s laughter was cruel. Solo was wracked by pain. The struggle on the trailer roof had drained more from him than he’d imagined. He wrenched along in the dust, crawling crab-fashioned, jerkily, like a cripple. He was roughly eight feet from the pistol. His muscles screamed silently as he pulled himself on.

The world of tents and trailers and merciless sun blurred into a surrealistic mural of pulsing unreal colors. He pulled himself forward again.

Again.

Now he was only four feet away from the gun–

In the distance Corrigan shouted a last warning: “Your friend Kuryakin is our insurance policy, Solo. If there is further pursuit, if you try to find Martin Bell again, Kuryakin will die. We can’t kill Bell but we can kill him. Good-by Solo. Take my message to your chiefs at U.N.C.L.E.”

And with a thud, the transparent cowl of the stub-winged plane smacked down. Immediately the after-burner belched and screamed. A horizontal column of flame jutted out. The stub-winged craft abruptly accelerated, angling up and out along the double track aimed at the sky. The roaring increased.

Smoke poured down around Solo as he dragged himself the last couple of feet, clamped his fingers on the revolver butt, forced himself upright by the sheer strength of his will.

The escape plane cleared the end of the high-pointing track, rising in a burst of jet power into the sun. It banked to the left.

Face wrenching in agony, Solo pulled the trigger. There was an empty click. Solo flung the revolver down in the dust, furious with frustration and despair. In the blue Arkansas sky the THRUSH missile-plane vanished on an unraveling thread of white smoke. Solo watched until it had become a dot. The little plane’s escape velocity had been incredible.

Staring into the sky to the north where it had disappeared, Solo allowed himself the luxury of a lost temper and a few roaring oaths, all directed

against himself. Suddenly an awl of pain bored into his eyes from behind.

In a moment he was leaning against the side of one of the trailers, dirty, pain-deviled, and frankly terrified by what had happened to his friend Illya Kuryakin.

TWO

Lights blinked and winked with comforting brightness beyond the East River. The little apartment in the luxury high-rise was quiet. A small ship's clock on the mantel ticked. It showed ten past eleven, on an evening six days after Illya's abduction from Spoon Forks.

The small apartment was a pleasant place, even though it had a semi-rumpled air typical of bachelor occupancy. The furniture was tasteful, modern. Here and there were nautical touches which bespoke Solo's term as commander of a corvette in the Royal Canadian Navy: a sextant; an antique brass spyglass; a wall arrangement of whaling prints; a large, framed full-color photo of Solo's 30-foot sloop which he kept harbored in a marina on Long Island. Through one doorway there were glints from a row of copper-bottomed utensils hanging in a small, neat kitchen.

Through another doorway Solo himself could be seen putting on a dark, impeccably tailored formal jacket. With a gloomy expression he tramped out of the bedroom, flicking out the light behind him. He scowled at the polished tips of his expensive evening shoes.

Usually he enjoyed his apartment. He enjoyed the privacy it afforded, the release from the tensions which automatically went with his frequently dangerous line of work.

But here he could relax and indulge himself.

Yet for the past five days, after a swift trip back to New York on the U.N.C.L.E. turbojet out of Little Rock, he had felt like a helpless animal in a cage every minute he was inside the apartment.

Tonight, he had a date with Babette as soon as the performance let out up at the *Met.* He recognized just how raw his own nerves had become from the fact that he was only mildly interested in the idea of seeing his charming fan-carrying soprano.

Ever since the stub-winged escape plane had rocketed into the blue Arkansas sky, there had been, professionally speaking, nothing but one unmitigated disaster after another.

Before his departure from Spoon Forks he had been forced to confront Harold and Maude Bell, not to mention Beth Andrews. He told them as much as he dared of what had happened at the Fairgrounds. He tried to

reassure them that the full resources of U.N.C.L.E. would be put into the search for Illya and Martin Bell.

They listened, but they could not conceal the emptiness of their hope. And Beth was not strong enough to completely conceal it for long. She broke and fled from the shady side porch, sobbing.

The Bells did not accuse him. It was unnecessary. No one had to inform Napoleon Solo that he had failed. The knowledge was gall in his mouth as he drove back to Little Rock.

In New York Mr. Waverly listened to his report with a quiet impassivity which was worse than the worst possible denunciation for incompetence. Mr. Waverly could accept the fact that even his top agents were human, prone to human mistakes. Therefore he did not bother to make the simple observation that Solo and Illya should have checked with U.N.C.L.E. and Washington to determine whether Felix Corrigan and his aides were legitimate.

And Solo didn’t need to be told that either. The knowledge ate painfully in his stomach as time passed.

A few hours after Solo had returned to New York headquarters the first dismal report came from North American Air Defense came in.

Yes, NORAD had picked up a strange track, coming out of Arkansas and heading north. Fighters had been jetted aloft. But the THRUSH escape plane had been traveling at an incredible velocity. The stub-winged plane rocketed north across the border into Canada practically before NORAD scrambled. The problem was instantly relayed to Canadian Air Defense. But it turned out to be insoluble.

Moments after crossing a parallel running roughly east and west through Ottawa, the blip vanished in a scramble of noise and light, the product of sophisticated THRUSH jamming devices.

Somewhere over northern Canada, then, the THRUSH craft with Illya aboard had disappeared.

Instantly the entire U.N.C.L.E. network was alerted. Agents all over the world turned their attention to the matter, since there was no guarantee that Illya and Martin Bell were being held prisoner in Canada. They might have been trans-shipped to Brussels or Kabul or Tahiti.

But one thing was fairly certain by the second day. Very likely Illya and Martin Bell were prisoners of the semi-maniacal Dr. Leonidas Volta. A

fresh programming of the U.N.C.L.E. computers revealed that the report of Volta's death at a THRUSH research project site in Iceland was erroneous.

Solo wanted action. He wanted to be in action, hunting, searching, finding Illya and Bell. He had absolutely no leads. Nor did the U.N.C.L.E. organization.

Solo prowled round and round headquarters during the day, round and round his apartment or the smaller bistros all night, trying to get himself to accept Alexander Waverly's counsel of watchful waiting. It was no good.

On the fourth day after Solo's return to New York, at 5:42 in the evening, a forty-mile area surrounding Omaha, Nebraska lost all of its electrical power for thirty minutes.

At 8:12 that same night, Chicago, the Wisconsin and Indiana shores bracketing it, and cities as far as forty-five miles inland from Lake Michigan, went dark for ninety minutes.

The following evening all of Connecticut, New York City, a major portion of Long Island, and parts of New Jersey all the way down to Philadelphia blacked out at the rush hour, staying dark for122 minutes. This was followed one hour later by total darkness and power failure for three and a half hours in the Virginia-Washington-Maryland area.

During the first blackout in Omaha, citizens behaved in reasonable good order. Chicago too escaped with but a few reports of looting and a slight rise in the nightly tally of thefts and personal assaults.

But when it happened again the second night up and down the Eastern seaboard, it somehow gave the people involved the terrified feeling that the phenomenon was controlled. And panic set in.

There were riots in New York. The worst occurred in the subways under Grand Central. The Grand Central debacle, resulting in two dead and dozens injured, was started by one frightened, hysterical woman shrieking about invasion.

All that long, dreadful night, others at U.N.C.L.E. were manning the phones, the communicators, the teletypes. U.N.C.L.E. teams, as well as forces under the direction of top-level U.S. intelligence agencies, infiltrated the critical riot areas. Vast arrays of technical equipment, most of it almost other-worldly in its degree of sophistication, were pressed into service in an effort to triangulate upon a single source of the power failure.

If Martin Bell's device were being quickly airlifted from test site to test site, then THRUSH was also managing to handle the accompanying

electronic deception very well.

No source could be located.

Fires were set by terrified mobs in Washington around midnight. Federal troops rolled into the city to restore order. The President took to the radio and television at seven the next morning. He reassured the nation that matters were under control.

It was a hollow statement.

Solo worked, ghoul-eyed and haggard from fatigue. The thought, *If it all goes dark from coast to coast at one time, all we can do is try to stop the panic–and then think very seriously about acceding to a THRUSH ultimatum for surrender when it comes.*

For it would surely come. And after the first nation crumbled, another would become the victim to the darkness that bred fear, bred chaos, bred the emergence of man's secret, unreasoning self. It was light which held all that at bay. THRUSH had unearthed a fundamental psychological weapon–

Beep-a-beep-a-beep-beep-a

Dazed, Napoleon Solo woke up. He had been standing in the center of his living room, staring like a man hypnotized into the pool of light cast by an old ship's lantern which had been refurbished as a table lamp. For how many seconds now had his communicator been signaling?

With shaky fingers Solo took the rod-like device from his pocket. Gave a twist to align the calibrations, said in a voice beginning to hoarsen with strain; "This is Solo."

A female voice said crisply, "Mr. Waverly is standing by on Channel D."

The priority channel. The backs of Solo's hands began to itch. Waverly came on: "Mr. Solo? Ah, good. I've caught you. Please take a taxi and get here as soon as possible. We have a telephone call for you. I prefer not to transfer it through these lines. We wish to monitor it very carefully, though I am quite certain the call and the caller are authentic. The lady is phoning long distance for you from Spoon Forks, Arkansas."

A crackle of silence. Waverly harrumphed. "You haven't fainted, have you, Mr. Solo?"

"No, sir. I'm here. It's a lady–"

"That is correct, Mr. Solo. Miss Beth Andrews. Apparently she just talked to Martin Bell."

THREE

The Conference room at headquarters swarmed with technicians. Lights and dials glowed on special monitoring equipment which had been wheeled in hastily. Mr. Waverly stalked up and down, up and down. Napoleon Solo sat beside a phone on the round table. His coat lay on the floor. He had torn off his tie and thrown it away.

"Miss Andrews–Beth?" he said. "Can you still hear me?"

Needles shot up, peaked and trembled high on the calibrated scales as the amplified voice of Beth Andrews filled the room, each syllable coming through with auditorium-like fidelity.

"Yes, Mr. Solo. I can hear you perfectly."

"I'm sorry for the delay. We wanted to put you on a kind of a bull horn set-up so everyone can hear. We're recording the conversation. Is that all right with you? We don't want to miss a detail."

Beth Andrews hesitated. "Yes, I have no objection. Oh, Mr. Solo. Martin sounded so terrible. I only talked to him for about ten or twenty seconds. He was crying–crying like a child. He's collapsed, Mr. Solo. He's collapsed!"

Solo wiped his face. The overhead lights cast harsh shadows alongside his nose. "Beth, I know this is a strain on you. But please try to tell us everything that happened. When did the call come through?"

"Around six this evening. I was home fixing dinner for myself. The phone rang. I picked it up. This voice–a man's voice, flat and cruel, as though he were laughing at me–asked if this was Beth Andrews. I said yes. He said Martin wanted to speak with me. I was almost out of my mind with happiness, Mr. Solo–"

"I understand, Beth," Solo murmured. "Go on."

"Martin came on the line. The connection was very bad. Crackly. Martin sounded hollow sometimes, as though he were calling from far away."

At the window Mr. Waverly turned suddenly. He silently formed the word, "*Canada*?"

"No, Martin started crying. Oh, Mr. Solo, they've hurt him! He's not a man to cry ordinarily. He said something about being forced to operate his

machine for *them.* That's when he broke down completely. I didn't get the rest."

Beth Andrews sounded as though she were controlling herself only through force of will. "Then the original man, the ugly, cruel one, came back on the wire. He told me Martin was being held prisoner by THRUSH. The same organization you mentioned. Oh, Mr. Solo–"

Swallowing hard, Solo said, "Beth, just try to relax."

"I can't! It's those blackouts, isn't it? I've watched TV. That's Martin's machine, isn't it, Mr. Solo? They're making him do it."

With a grim glance at Waverly, Solo agreed, "That is very probably so."

"But there were no blackouts tonight."

Solo cocked his head at Waverly. He hadn't been tuned in on the news for the past hour. Waverly said softly, "That is right. Nothing has happened this evening, anywhere."

Solo told Beth Andrews that she was correct, that THRUSH had evidently not run any tests of the anti-power device since the preceding night. Before he could ask her why this was so important, Beth blurted, "Then they do have him! It's really true. They said he collapsed Mr. Solo. They said so far, Martin had only operated his machine at less than full power. Tonight was to be a full-power test. This afternoon Martin told them he wouldn't do it. The man from THRUSH said Martin refused to be a party to–to panic that could lead to butchery in the streets."

"Beth, listen!"

Solo urged. "If all this is true, then we've finally got the lever we need!"

Beth controlled her crying. "The what?"

"The lever. An advantage. They need Martin. He's had a nervous breakdown or something like it because he isn't accustomed to pressures like this. That gives us a few high cards for a change."

"You don't understand, Mr. Solo."

"What don't I understand?"

"The reason THRUSH called me."

"To reassure you that Martin was alive?"

Mr. Waverly made a slight face. Solo realized the poor logic of his own question. Quickly Beth went on:

"These dreadful people want me to come to Martin. They want me to bring his parents along. They said Martin needed to see faces he could trust. They're worried, Mr. Solo! You're right about that. There is nothing they

can do without Martin. They think that maybe I can help him down. And seeing his parents will help him too. They warned me not to tell anyone about this. They warned me!”

Solo scowled. “What will they do to Martin if you don’t follow instructions?”

Now Beth’s voice really broke, raw and agony-ridden. The reverberations of it in the silent U.N.C.L.E. chamber made even the hardened Waverly cover his eyes.

“They said they’d kill him. They–they meant it!”

“Kill him? But then he’d be of no use to them!”

“I know. But that awful man with a strange name–”

“Volta” Was it Volta?”

“I think so. He said that if I didn’t come to where they’re keeping Martin prisoner and bring the Bells along, Martin would be no good to them anyway, so they would have no choice but to kill him. Mr. Solo, I was so frightened. After they hung up I wanted to call the number you left with me. But I didn’t. I waited. I waited and waited, trying to think, about what was right. I don’t want Martin to die. But those people–they mean it. I’m afraid they’ll kill us too.”

“Beth,” Solo said slowly, “that is very likely just what they would do. You made the right decision. And a courageous one. Have you told the Bells about this?”

“No”

“Well, you must. Do you actually know where Martin is being held?”

“They never said. There is supposed to be a dark blue sedan in a parking lot in Little Rock tomorrow at three in the afternoon. They gave me the license number. I’m to pick it up. There will be an envelope sewn into one of the rear seats. Instructions–a map or something. I gather it’s a long way, and we’re supposed to drive.”

Silently Napoleon Solo marveled at the cruel audacity of the THRUSH plan. With Martin in breakdown, Dr. Leonidas Volte had moved on a spectacular scale.

Volta and his aides had planned their psychological gamble correctly. Beth would rather go to Martin Bell’s assistance at her own peril than do nothing and risk his death. Beth’s one concession to her own safety and Martin’s had been the agonizing decision to phone U.N.C.L.E.

Briskly Solo said," You must go, Beth. You'll pick up the Bells and get that car tomorrow."

Suddenly there was blind terror booming into the conference room as she spoke, "I knew I had to go, I guess. But Mr. Solo, I'm afraid!"

Solo said quietly, "Don't worry. We'll be behind you every step of the way."

And finally, for the first time in long, nerve-twisting hours, Alexander Waverly smiled.

FOUR

Staying right behind Beth Andrews and Harold and Maude Bell every mile of the way along the route marked out by THRUSH was one of those terrible, dull, time-consuming jobs which Napoleon Solo and all U.N.C.L.E. professionals now and again encountered.

Actually he was not right behind the late-model dark blue sedan at all. He was well out of sight of it, remaining at all times a minimum of three miles to the rear.

Solo drove a light gray two-passenger American production auto designed along sports car lines. The chassis and body shell, steering wheel, floor stick and bucket seats were about all that remained of the original factory equipment. U.N.C.L.E. laboratory technicians had ripped out the entire motor and drive train, installing a much hotter mill under the bonnet. They had also provided the driver with a new fifth gear, a sort of super-overdrive which could achieve tremendous forward speeds in emergencies.

An ordinary motorist would have been baffled by the array of dials and gauges now showing on the re-designed instrument panel. Chief among them, just over the center of the board, was a round glass tracking display board. In the center, a greenish blip remained in a more or less constant position at the intersection of several grid lines. This blip showed Solo that the dark blue THRUSH sedan was still on the road ahead.

Solo had picked up Beth Andrews and the Bells, who looked exhausted but managed to behave with quiet, unassuming bravery, in Little Rock. The trio located the dark blue sedan in the designated lot, while Solo watched from the roof of an adjoining warehouse. Solo made no direct contact with the three until they arrived at a pre-arranged meeting place, a motel on the outskirts of Memphis, Tennessee.

By that time Solo was reasonably certain that THRUSH trusted the power of fear sufficiently to let Martin’s parents and girl drive north unpursued. He had spotted some THRUSH bird-dogs clumsily pretending to be sewer repairmen on the street next to the parking lot in Little Rock when the pickup was made. But apparently after making sure the trio was on its way, THRUSH preferred to retire its observers and let Beth and the Bells follow orders.

These orders, typed and in a sealed envelope, had been found by Beth in the blue car's upholstery. Solo pored over them late at night in the Memphis motel. Harold Bell watched from an armchair, a tumbler of bourbon in his hand.

The strain was showing. Bell's face was pale, the jowls blued by a day's growth of beard. Maude Bell had already taken a sleeping powder and retired to bed in the next room, mentally and physically exhausted.

"Not much information there," Bell said gloomily.

Solo scratched his chin. "Just the numbers of highways. I'll have to check a map. The last line of instruction gives the final highway you're to take in Canada–into a public parking lot in some place called Doomsday Creek. Have you looked that up?"

Beth Andrews had been pacing. In the dimly lighted motel sitting room she heard the name of the destination, bit her lip, turned away. Harold Bell sipped bourbon, said, "Yes, you'll find it on the map. It doesn't appear to be a large town."

"I know something about Canada," Napoleon Solo replied. "Doomsday Creek escapes me. Ontario?"

"Yes, in the wilderness northwest of Ottawa. Ski country. Do you think it's where we'll find Martin and the THRUSH station?" As an ex-U.N.C.L.E. professional, Harold Bell knew the power and threat, knew the cruel capability of THRUSH. His voice wavered a little as he pronounced the name. He went on, "I would imagine that Doomsday Creek is a pickup point. The THRUSH station won't be there, but we won't know where it is until we're led to it."

Stretching, Solo stood. "Quite right. Which makes it very important that I get that homing device planted on the underside of your back bumper. As well as go over the car for any little presents or booby-traps THRUSH might have installed."

Of the latter, Solo found none, though he worked through most of the night under the lonely parking lot lights of the motel. He went over and over the blue sedan. At the end of this period of effort, he was reasonably convinced the blue car was clean.

This was not to say, of course, that THRUSH had not installed some late piece of hardware of a design U.N.C.L.E. had not yet caught up with. That was a risk he had to take.

Solo put in the homing device. It would allow him to stay three miles behind the blue sedan, out of sight, and still keep track of it on the display glass. He turned in for a quick hour of sleep while the sun rose. He tossed in fretful dreams in which he saw his friend Illya being tortured by various devilish, painful instruments employed by THRUSH.

At dawn there began three days of grueling driving.

Solo had to bear the brunt of the trip himself. Harold and Maude Bell and Beth spelled one another. The blue car, followed by Solo's gray one three miles back, cut northward through Tennessee and Kentucky. They bisected Ohio from southwest to northeast. They pushed on through Pennsylvania to the New York Thruway, and by eleven the second night they had stopped outside Syracuse, New York, ready to turn north in the morning to the St. Lawrence and the crossing into Canada.

Feeling drugged, drained, Solo ate by himself. After Memphis he had no personal contact with Beth Andrews and the Bells. Next he made his nightly report to Mr. Waverly. He went to sleep feeling uneasy.

Perhaps, he told himself as he drifted off, perhaps it was the thumbscrew tension that got tighter and tighter, the closer they came to their destination. For Solo did not honestly know whether he would find Illya Kuryakin alive.

He suspected Martin Bell was alive, even though there had been no more blackouts. THRUSH seemed to be playing that part of the game according to the rules.

Thus far Solo had only a broad plan concerning what he would do if and when he located the research station above Doomsday Creek. Mr. Waverly was already assembling a shock force of picked agents. They could board an U.N.C.L.E. jet and be in Canada within an hour, armed and ready to parachute in if necessary. But keeping out of THRUSH's sight in Doomsday Creek and then following the quarry the rest of the way to the headquarters would be tricky.

Never before had Napoleon Solo felt quite so uncertain about an affair. The wormwood taste of failure still lingered from Spoon Forks.

Morning brought crisp, cool sunshine and a lift of spirits. Unfortunately the lift didn't last long.

An hour after leaving Syracuse, Solo passed Watertown, New York. The blip of the blue car was still steady in the special dash display glass. His car was approaching the massive glittering suspension bridge to Canada.

Solo pulled in at the toll gate on the American side. He answered the necessary custom questions, then drove on up the long, angled approach leading to the impressive main span. He touched a stud. The dummy dash panel with inoperative instruments slid up out of place into the extra deep dashboard cowl. Solo's regular instruments were back on view.

Everything seemed perfect. The blue sedan had reached the Canadian side, was already turning onto the Queen's Highway. A U.S. station wagon containing a mother and dad and several junior tourists passed Solo in the opposite lane, coming down off the bridge and heading back into America.

Napoleon Solo tapped his left shoe on the floorboard in a nervous rhythm.

The sun shone in dazzling splendor from the waters of the St. Lawrence far below. The gray sedan reached the top of the approach and rolled out onto the long main span. It stretched empty ahead. Down below to the left and right spread the panorama of island after small green island.

Eastward Solo could just make out the blur of a Great Lakes ore freighter crawling out to sea.

He rubbed his knuckles into one eyesocket, then the other. His mouth tasted flat from too much greasy food eaten on the run. He found himself humming more loudly than his custom.

The back of his neck began to crawl. That old, professional instinct for danger–

He could see nothing that could possibly cause the reaction, yet he trusted it implicitly. He began turning his head in small arcs, first to the left, then the right, scrutinizing his surroundings more closely than he normally would. Somewhere, somewhere at the edge of his mind, something was threateningly wrong.

The river was quiet. The islands gleamed. Still no traffic on the bridge. He listened, really hearing for the first time in hours the hum of his high-speed, special-tread tires with the built-in polysteel cleats. That humming was off, somehow. Minor-key. Discordant.

Then Napoleon Solo realized that he was hearing the sound of the treads on the bridge concrete plus another blending in. A faint, eerie, banshee sound rose and wailed at him somewhere in the bright morning blaze of the northern sky.

He peered through the windshield. His palms went cold and slick on the molded plastic of the steering wheel.

Two blackish dots were shooting straight at the bridge at incredible speed. The banshee scream grew louder and louder.

It was the wail of the jet engines of two aircraft.

The planes, needle-tipped and of fighter configuration, were approaching the great bridge in a wing-to-wing formation. They banked steeply over the river, leveled out so that they were following the river's course and flying toward the bridge at frightening speed, dead level with it.

Something had gone wrong. Something had slipped somewhere along the line. THRUSH knew.

The dull gray jet fighters bore no markings. Solo hit the gas pedal. The extra gear kicked in, rocketing him to a speed of ninety within seconds. The phantom planes sprouted fire-blooms on the leading edges of their wings.

Solo drove like a madman, straight down the center of the span. He wasn't going fast enough–

Trapped on the bridge, the gray sedan took the first hail of bullets broadside. Something under the dash exploded. Sparks hissed. The display glass went dark. Solo swore and kept the pedal floored.

With a shattering burst of sound the THRUSH jets screamed into a climb, skimming the top of the bridge and racing on down the sunlit river.

Solo fought for control of the racing gray car. All his instruments were dead out. In seconds he'd lost his vital link to Martin Bell and Illya Kuryakin, lost the blue sedan which was speeding on into Canada. And its passengers would not know that somehow THRUSH had discovered that Solo was trailing them to Doomsday Creek.

That wasn't the worst. The worst was the immediate moment. Not yet to the halfway point across the bridge, even though his car was careening along at frightening speed, and billowing smoke from its blasted cowl, Solo heard the jets scream in the sky, banking, turning. They were faster than this car would ever be.

With a whine and a roar the THRUSH jets leveled out again and came flashing back at the bridge from the west, wing to wing, making the run that would make the kill.

ACT III

COLOR THE CANADIAN SUNSET BLOODY

For long, numberless hours, Illya Kuryakin's world had consisted of six concrete surfaces and intermittent nightmares. The six concrete surfaces were the walls, floor and ceiling of the concrete-block cell in which he'd awakened following the unpleasant events at Spoon Forks. One of the last things he remembered was Felix Corrigan lumbering at him as he crouched in the shadow of a trailer. Corrigan had brained him.

Illya vaguely recalled being lifted, carried over Corrigan's shoulder, dumped down dizzily onto some small, tight space. He had a grotesque memory of Corrigan's fat-necked head gliding down close, distorted as though photographed through a fish-eye lens. Bent double, aching in a cramped area behind a single seat of some type, Illya fitfully tried to bash Corrigan in the head. A needle scraped along Illya's wrist. The visual distortion worsened.

He remembered nothing else until he awakened in the cell.

The floor was roughly six feet square. The ceiling was barely higher. Two dim ceiling lights behind thick wire mesh grilles provided the feeble illumination. A small port, one of the cinder blocks on a hinge, opened presently down near the floor. A pan of indigestible-looking stew was shoved in by a hairy hand. Illya saw nothing of his benefactor except the cuff of a khaki THRUSH uniform.

Fearing the introduction of drugs into the food, Illya did not eat it. Within an hour–he guessed it was an hour; his watch had been taken–the food began to discolor and emit a nauseatingly rancid aroma. Illya squatted on his haunches in a corner of the cell, trying not to grow ill. Shortly the block swung open again. The cuffed hand snatched the poisoned plate away.

The cell provided no creature comforts, save for a primitive water closet which shot out of another wall at infrequent intervals. Illya had no bed. The lights were never dimmed. No one spoke to him over a microphone, though he grew to have the uncanny feeling that he was being carefully watched.

There was not a single, solitary bit of furniture except that incredible motorized water closet which rode on a wheeled track.

Time blurred. Unusual things began to happen. Illya began to see colored dots in front of his eyes. The temperature in the cell would rise until he was bathed in perspiration. Them it would plummet until he crouched in a corner, shivering. Time became even more distorted.

How long had he been a prisoner? A day? A week? Ten minutes? Sometimes it seemed that time was speeding incredibly swiftly. At other times he would kneel panting in a corner, waiting laboriously through eternity for the next sluggish beat of his own heart.

Illya had the good sense to remember that he had seen before first hand what THRUSH could do to weaken a man. He was being brainwashed so that he would be suitably pliant when THRUSH got around to dealing with him.

Illya had been trained rigorously by U.N.C.L.E. in the proper mental attitudes to adopt in such a situation. He tried. The odd hours at which the lights in the cell were turned on and off did not really fray his nerves for a while. Nor did the rapid changes in temperature. But eventually he began to feel himself wearing down. He fought the weariness, the sudden debilitating feeling of who cares? He managed to stave it off. But he didn’t escape its grip completely.

His face felt grimy. His beard had sprouted. The last few times when he huddled down in a corner to sleep–times when the lights had been doused–he was wakened suddenly by the lights flashing in erratic rhythm, accompanied by the amplified ding-dong of some kind of bell. Eventually the subtle techniques undermined his wiry strength and his morale to the point where he now and then had to take a fierce bite of his own hand to keep from screaming with frustration. But still he managed to maintain a little reserve of courage, managed to keep a small part of his mind guarded, safe.

In this silent place, a voice constantly reminded him that he was probably being surveyed through hidden optical devices. He took some pains to rant and run around the cell. He even did a fairly good imitation of a frightened dog’s howl. That ought to convince his guards that he was crumbling.

Toward the end, as he alternately froze and sweltered, dozed and wakened to flashing lights and ringing bells, less and less acting was

required. If this went on much longer, he knew, he'd be a mumbling jelly.

Where was he being held?

Where was Dr. Volta, if indeed he were here in Dr. Volta's clutches?

Where was Martin Bell?

Where was Napoleon Solo?

"Where? Where? *Where*?"

TWO

Hands gripped his shoulders, shook him.

“Kuryakin! Stop that sniveling!”

Horrified, Illya realized that he had lost control for an unknown period of time. He knew this because he returned to consciousness as though he were swimming up through a sea of thick turtle soup.

He was on his feet, weaving back and forth. There was something familiar about the big, bulky man who was shaking him. The man had a chunky face, lumpy nose, downturned mouth. His neck fat hung in a fold over the collar of his THRUSH officer’s uniform.

The man shook Illya once again, gave him a smart slap across the cheeks.

“Kuryakin! Straighten up or we’ll have to beat you.”

All at once Illya recognized his tormenter. It was Felix Corrigan, more trimly attired now that he had discarded his cheap suit for the uniform of an officer of U.N.C.L.E.‘s arch-enemy. When recognition came on inside Illya’s head, his grimy fists balled to strike. Training, conditioning, intelligence all acted instinctively to damp the hostile impulses. He relaxed.

He had to gain the lay of the land before he struck. All he could see now was Corrigan, and behind him a large opening in the cell wall where a large door had opened. Beyond that lay a corridor. Fresh cold air flowed in from that corridor where two lesser THRUSH soldiers waited with stubby automatic rifles at the ready position.

Gingerly Felix Corrigan released Illya’s shoulders.

“Well. We’ve conditioned you nicely. Meek as a lamb.” Corrigan smile and gave Illya’s sleeve a tug. “Come along now, Kuryakin, that’s a good fellow.” Turning smartly on the heel of a polished boot, Corrigan strutted outside.

Illya blinked and shuffled forward. His mind was alert but he was badly worried. His arms and legs felt perilously weak. When it came making a run for it, he wondered whether he would have the strength.

Continuing to fake a totally enfeebled mental state, Illya lurched down the corridor after Corrigan. The big man’s boots clacked with a loud, unpleasant sound. The guards brought up the rear. Ahead Illya saw a slot

window about shoulder height in the right-hand wall. Deep red sunlight flooded in to stain the floor and opposite wall.

When Illya drew abreast of the window, he stopped and peered. Corrigan didn't seem to mind. He looked rather amused.

What Illya saw was literally and figuratively chilling. Below the window a snowy valley dropped away, bathed in cold evening sunlight. On the far side of the valley loomed ferocious-looking mountain peaks with jagged summits. Snow lay over everything. On one of the valley's slopes Illya saw a party of people, tiny stick-figures at this distance. The party wound its way upward around the drifts. And a ski patrol, armed THRUSH soldiers who poled expertly and carried weapons slung over the backs of their parkas, was slaloming down to meet the arrivals.

Corrigan snapped his fingers. "Come along, Kuryakin. No more time for scenery."

Illya licked his lips. "Where are we?"

"Just a little place up in Canada."

Illya did not need a geography lesson to know that the kind of scenery he had just viewed meant that they were so far up in Canada as to be virtually in a wilderness. That isolation, the separation of miles between this THRUSH outpost and other human habitation, instantly doubled the difficulties Illya would face if he tried to escape.

A pneumatically controlled chrome steel door at the corridor's end slid aside. Illya staggered forward into another hall. This one was more brightly lighted. Doors opened on either side. In the rooms beyond these doors white-coated THRUSH technicians worked feverishly at high-banked machines that whined, clucked, ticked, beeped, made racketing noises and flashed with lights. Corrigan led the way to the last door on the right, a door padded in black leather. Illya was thrust through. He found himself in a small, carpeted observation booth furnished with comfortable armchairs.

Illya started to sag into one of the chairs. Corrigan made a gently chiding sound. He dragged Illya back up by the scruff of his neck. On entire wall of the booth was glass. Beyond, Illya saw another sight which jolted him.

He was looking down into a THRUSH technical center at least the size of a small city block on each side. More fantastic machinery, including digital computers and dynamo-like installations of incredible proportions, filled the hall. Scientists swarmed everywhere. Whole rows of lights lit up

at once. And directing all this demonic organized confusion was a hauntingly familiar, a slight, capering, white-coated little man with a disorderly shock of reddish hair.

Fully a dozen and a half scientists swarmed around this personage, who was in turn fussing over a harmless-looking black box. The box measured about a foot square. It rested on an otherwise cleared marble-topped table.

Felix Corrigan pressed a small stud in the wall, said loudly, “I have him, Doctor.”

Illya’s spine crawled as the capering little figure froze down there on the floor. The little man turned, raised his head. His pale blue eyes were huge and cruel.

The little man thrust his way out through the crush of his co-workers. Scuttling past a booth where an armed THRUSH guard sat stolidly on a stool–there were half a dozen such booths around the floor of the research hall–the Doctor came bounding up a staircase and slammed into the booth.

“How is he, Corrigan?”

The new arrival’s glee was all the more horrific because Illya Kuryakin knew full well that THRUSH did not tolerate mental deficients within its ranks. The little man with the hair like a ridiculous burlesque house fright wig was typically THRUSH–a completely insane man who was, by virtue of his alliance with the power-hungry supra-nation, of necessity also pragmatically sane. A comic grotesque on the surface, this little creature was not to be underestimated. If anything, the man’s irrepressible glee represented unspeakable cruelty.

How is he, Doctor?” Corrigan repeated. “Why, excellent, thanks to your recommendations on pre-conditioning. He’s placid as an egg.”

Illya grunted, doing his best to reinforce that conviction. In truth his mind was sharp enough. It was the rest of him. He felt abysmally weak, light-headed.

The little man rubbed his hands together. “That’s splendid, Corrigan. Good work! Of course U.N.C.L.E. is not known for the stamina of its agents. Lily-spined weaklings, every one of them. Eh, Kuryakin?”

The little man gave Illya’s chin a vicious tweak. “You’ll soon rue the day you decided to oppose THRUSH. By that I mean you will rue it personally. Ah, but I’ll explain when our visitors arrive.”

“The ski patrol is on its way to meet them now, Doctor,” Corrigan said.

“Doctor?” Illya said in a sepulchral voice which required very little faking.

“Dr. A. C. Currant of the carnival–”

“Yes, yes, quite right. I supervised the–ah–spiriting away of young Bell. I hate that filthy boy. Too many brains. He developed an anti-electricity generator which I was unable to perfect in a lifetime of research. Under threat, he showed me where my equations were wrong and enabled me to construct the unit–”

The little man’s liver-spotted hand indicated the innocuous looking black-box apparatus on the table down the hall.

“Then I put it together in less than twenty-four hours! Maddening, maddening. On the other hand, since the device is working now and belongs to THRUSH, I suppose it makes no difference.”

Illya licked his lips, still acting half awake. “Where is Martin Bell, Dr.–Currant?”

The little man frowned. “Corrigan, we may have addled his brains a mite too much. It’s Volta, you U.N.C.L.E. dolt. Dr. Leonidas Volta!”

All Illya said was, “Oh.” His acting seemed to convince them. “Oh, I see.”

“Corrigan, you oaf, if you’ve over-stimulated him–I wanted him precisely prepared to enjoy the little reunion we’re about to stage. Docile enough to cause us no trouble, but with enough awareness to appreciate what he will see. You may have blundered.”

Corrigan blanched. To save the situation, Illya perked up by jiggling his head a few times. “I’m all right,” he croaked. “I know who you are Volta. So you’ve got Martin Bell’s device working?”

“Yes, yes. But we haven’t got Martin Bell himself working. At least not yet. We need him to complete the final step, the modification of the apparatus so that it will operate at full capacity. This he refused to assist us with last week. When my aides grew insistent and applied some rather amusing physical torture, the insufferably brilliant boy collapsed.”

This, of course, was all news to Illya. He tried not to show his startlement as Dr. Volta continued, “And just at the time when we had concluded our first tests! Omaha, Chicago, New York, Washington–beautiful! We got no panic in San Francisco, but we certainly began to get it in those other cities. And Toronto–that will be the spark which ignites world hysteria! I don’t think we shall have to darken many cities, Kuryakin, to

bring one government after another to its knees. On the other hand, if we do have to go worldwide and a few million lives are lost–" Dr. Volta shrugged and grinned merrily. Illya's mind worked hard trying to absorb all he had learned. He mumbled, "Toronto will be the next experiment?"

Volta's fright-wig of red hair bobbed. "As you are probably aware, several of the key international powers have pooled funds to build a new transport aircraft. With typical democratic sentimentality it has been christened *Plowshare.* The correct nomenclature is MST-1, standing for the first Modified Supersonic Transport. This rather sickly cooperative project is designed to provide a super-liner to carry food and farm implements to new nations. It–am I boring you, Kuryakin? You are staring at me in a rather peculiar way."

"I'm listening," Illya breathed. He was, for the pattern of terror shaping up behind the words of the curious little maniac had jolted Illya back to full, desperate awareness. He remembered to sound thick-witted: "Go–go on, please."

"The *Plowshare* tests are complete. Her maiden demonstration flight is scheduled to depart from Toronto within the next ninety-six hours. Many international dignitaries will be flying on that short trip. As supervisor for THRUSH, I intend to take the anti-power unit to Toronto, knock *Plowshare* from the air and, incidentally, devastate the city with a blackout of phenomenal proportions.

"Our operatives will arrange to add spice by spreading a spirit of riot, rapine and ruin in Toronto while the lights are out. THRUSH will exploit the international incident, the death of the dignitaries in the *Plowshare* crash, for all it is worth.

"Believe me, Kuryakin, we shall very effectively sow the seeds of doubt. By use of carefully pre-planted evidence to be discovered by so-called loyal nationals in various capitals–actually they'll all be THRUSH operatives–we shall turn nation against nation with conclusive proof that *another* nation is attempting to tip the balance of power by creating this anti-electricity super-weapon. Then, when the major free nations are in a state of disarray and disunion, we shall black out their cities one nation at a time. No allies will rise to defend them."

Dr. Volta tilted his hand sharply.

"Countries will fall. One by one they will have to submit to secret THRUSH ultimatums for surrender."

Horrified, realizing that such a scheme could work, Illya croaked out, “But it all depends on Toronto. And that depends on Martin Bell.”

On the floor of the research hall there was a sudden flurry of activity. Emerging from the shadows at the hall’s far side and being led in between two giant, hulking computers was a slender, dark-haired young man in filthy slacks and a grimy shirt. The young man wore no shoes. His hair was unkempt. He had to be supported by two THRUSH soldiers. Illya recognized Martin Bell from identification photos.

“See, Doctor?” said Corrigan cheerfully. “He’s better already, just knowing his parents are on the way along with that snippy little twist he fancies.”

Once more Illya goggled. “Do you mean to say the Bell family is *here*? And the Andrews girl?”

“Very nearly!” Dr. Volta replied. “They comprise the party which is just now being met outside our station by our ski patrol.”

With sadistic delight Dr. Volta rapidly detailed how THRUSH had contacted the Bells through Beth Andrews and threatened Martin’s death until she agreed to bring the Bells north to join him for whatever therapeutic effect it might have. Seeing Martin Bell being led into the hall, Illya knew the plot had worked at least in part.

“It was a gamble,” Dr. Volta said. “We had no choice. It has turned out splendidly.”

He described how the Bells with Beth had motored to Canada and been picked up by THRUSH agents at the tiny town of Doomsday Creek. Illya gathered this town was some one hundred or so miles distant from the research station. Dr. Volta nodded.

“Of course we assumed that U.N.C.L.E. might be keeping the Bells under observation. We discovered it was even worse than we had thought. Miss Andrews contacted your decadent organization, arranged to have U.N.C.L.E. follow the car in which she was driving to Canada.”

Illya’s face was ugly. “And then she turned around and told you? I don’t believe it.”

“You water-brained idiot,” Dr. Volta chortled, “naturally she didn’t. She is thoroughly, stupidly in love with Martin Bell. She is on the side of the angels–while they last.

“The explanation is simple. The U.N.C.L.E. operative who was following the party failed to discover one new piece of detection hardware

we had placed in the subject car. Don't blame the poor fellow. It's a circuit and receptor molded into a plastic laminate barely one thirty-second of an inch thick. The laminate's actually fused into the glove compartment front wall, an integral part of it. Our monitors picked up the girl's conversations with the bells. When they were just outside of Little Rock she revealed that she had contacted U.N.C.L.E. and that your operative was following right behind in another car."

Dr. Leonidas Volta paused, smiling a little death's-head smile. "And those, Kuryakin, are all the facts. Take any chair. Please sit down now. I wanted you kept in isolation until this moment when, you could witness an historic scene. The reunion of Martin Bell with his parents and sweetheart. With that reunion effected, I am quite certain young Martin will cooperate–"

Dr. Volta let a little scowl trouble his forehead. Down on the research hall floor Martin was struggling with his captors. Pitiably, he did not have enough strength to make any difference. The guards held him firmly there near the table where the black-box apparatus reposed.

Illya tried to blot from his mind what havoc that box would wreak if Volta succeeded.

"If Martin still refuses," Dr. Volta went on, "we now have a means to make him cooperate. His parents. His best-beloved. With all those little rats gnawing in your brain, Kuryakin, you are now fully prepared to witness the scene."

Volta scuttled for the door. A yellow flasher out in the research hall was blinking. Corrigan pointed.

"Our guests are inside the station, Doctor."

"Yes, I must hurry. But I did forget to tell you one other thing, Kuryakin. The agent following the Bells and the girl was dispatched by two of our fighter planes. From a secret field we maintain near Kingston, Ontario. Our pilots reported a successful kill. I believe the agent was a friend of yours? At least a close associate."

To Illya's left Felix Corrigan was nodding.

"Mr. Solo. Wasn't that his name? Take a seat, Kuryakin. And enjoy. Enjoy!"

Blue-marble eyes bright and cruel, Dr. Leonidas Volta left the observation booth while Illya Kuryakin stood stunned with a disbelief that quickly changed to utter despair.

THREE

To Illya no blow could have been more severe than the news that THRUSH had liquidated Napoleon. Yet Illya was a professional. The possibility of death was always with him. So Volta's revelation did not incapacitate him.

After a moment his thoughts began to clear a little. He felt stronger. Whether he really was or whether the adrenalin of rage was pumping through him mattered very little. His urgent need now was to get out of this hellish place. For it seemed clear that he was the only agent who could bring down U.N.C.L.E.'s wrath on Volta and his associates before they worked their perfidious plan in Toronto.

Illya's pocket communicator had been taken away. Only one avenue lay open–a desperate dash for it.

He didn't like to contemplate the perils of trying to cross a snowy Canadian wilderness without adequate maps or compass. Nevertheless, he had to try.

Illya dissembled. He pretended to slump suddenly, tottering into the nearest upholstered chair. He stretched out, head lolling. Corrigan's voice cracked from behind.

"Was the news about Solo a little too much, Kuryakin?"

Cautiously Illya stretched his legs. The toes of his shoes were an inch from the front wall of the observation booth. He remained sprawled out, as though in a daze. He threw in a feeble-witted moan for good measure. His mind, by contrast, clicked swiftly. Thought tumbled over thought.

From a corner of one slitted eye, Illya observed the floor of the research hall. Dr. Volta was in sight now, capering and hopping from foot to foot just this side of the table holding the black-box apparatus. THRUSH technicians clustered near. THRUSH guards propped up a sodden-looking Martin Bell. And on the far side of the hall, a huge concrete door rolled aside.

Four soldiers forming a square marched into the research area. In the center of the square, huddling together, Illya recognized Harold Bell with his arm around his wife, and Beth Andrews.

Should he try to take them along?

Illya rejected the idea at once. Beth Andrews might just make it, but–

Martin’s mother saw her son. She burst into tears. Illya knew he had to leave them all behind and take a chance that Volta would keep them alive because he needed them. To attempt to escape across the snow by himself would be hard enough. Having the Bells and Beth along would decrease his chances to absolute nil. It was a hard decision, but a necessary one. The important mission was to inform Mr. Waverly about Toronto.

Down in the hall Beth Andrews stood white-faced, staring across the distance that separated her from Martin. The young scientist raised his head. Recognition seemed to flicker on his face. Beth let out a wail of anguish which Illya could hear even through the thickness of glass in the booth window. Dropping her handbag, her disheveled hair flying, Beth ran forward.

The THRUSH foursome guarding her turned inward to block her path. Dr. Volta clapped his hands. The guards fell back. Beth ran on, straight up to Martin.

Trembling, she stopped and looked into his eyes. A strange, tormented half-smile crossed the young scientist’s face. With a sob he lunged forward, wrapped his arms around the girl, buried his face in her hair.

Abruptly Corrigan spoke, “Here, Kuryakin! You’re not watching this touching scene. Sit up!”

Illya groaned. He rolled his head from side to side, slouching lower in the chair until the tips of his shoes were pushing against the booth wall below the window.

Corrigan was annoyed. He grabbed hold of Illya’s hair to yank his head up.

“Kuryakin! Didn’t you hear what I said?”

Pushing against the booth wall with all the power of his legs, Illya sent his chair smashing back into Corrigan’s uniformed midsection.

The THRUSH officer cursed, doubling forward at the waist. Still balanced precariously in the chair, Illya whipped his hands back over his head. He seized Corrigan by the back of his neck and levered hard.

Illya slid out of the chair as Corrigan flew forward. Corrigan’s skull met the wall of the booth with a pulpy thud. Illya scrambled all over him, karate-chopping the man’s fat neck. Corrigan kicked. Then with a feeble grab at Illya’s head, he gave a wheeze and blacked out.

On all fours, so as not to be seen from the research hall, Illya crawled to the booth door. Already he felt bubble-headed from the exertion. He

reached up, twisted the knob, inched the door open. He peered out.

Evidently all of the THRUSH technicians he had seen earlier had adjourned to the main research area. Beyond various open doors machines chattered unattended.

Illya crawled forward into the corridor. He stood up. One of his joints popped loud as a gunshot in the silence.

Illya backed against the wall, blinking his eyes to make them stop blurring. His ears buzzed eerily. The corridor tilted, swam out of focus. Illya pressed against the wall.

Slowly the surroundings sharpened again.

Which way?

To the left, the chrome steel door remained closed.

No good. That route, heavy with THRUSH guards, led back to the cell where he had been imprisoned. This hall ended a short distance to his right. But now Illya noticed what he had not noticed before–double doors, painted dark blue, of a configuration suspiciously like an elevator's. There was even a red stud set in the wall alongside.

Illya stared in that direction.

"What the devil! *You!*"

The hoarse shout brought Illya spinning around. A last scientific straggler with clipboard in hand had emerged suddenly from one of the research rooms. Illya's face turned professionally vicious, intimidating. He crouched and started back for the pudgy little white-coated man, moving fast, whipping up his hand for another jugular-chop.

The terrified man leaped back inside the research room. The door thudded into place. Illya was caught in the center of the hall, hand upraised and no one to strike.

He spun around again and went sliding and banging to the end of the corridor. He thumbed the red stud. He glanced back at that locked door. He pressed his ear against the dark blue steel. Distantly he heard a rising whine. The passing seconds coated his palms with perspiration. Finally the elevator arrived. Illya stepped back, ready to gut-punch anyone inside–

The lighted box was empty.

Jumping inside, Illya took one relieved breath and examined the control panel. A light glowed behind the button numbered 5. Illya took a chance and pressed the G marker. The elevator began to descend.

Illya slumped against the wall, conserving his strength.

A light flicked on behind the button for 4.

That went dark and 3 lit.

Then 2.

Finally 1 came alight. It had just gone out and Illya was watching for the G marker to glow when the alarm sirens began warbling.

G lighted. The doors slid open. A ferociously cold blast of air slapped Illya in the face, burning his lungs. This was the cold of the outdoors, of the frozen snow he'd observed earlier.

The elevator opened into a short concrete tunnel, dim by contrast to the glare of evening beyond the entrance. Framed by the square tunnel mouth toward which he ran, a slope of red-hued snow blazed in the last light of sunset.

Like a hiccoughing scream the *wheepa-wheepa* of the amplified warning sirens bounced off the concrete walls. Illya had nearly reached the tunnel entrance when a silhouetted figure stepped into sight from the left.

The THRUSH guard wore a bulky coat with a fur-lined parka style hood. His snow boots were thrust into the bindings of a long pair of skis. With mittened hands he struggled to bring his rapid-fire rifle into position to blast Illya.

The guard had difficulty because his mittens got tangled in the rifle's shoulder sling strap. The alarm sirens boomed and wailed, bouncing back and forth across the snowy valley, a nightmare of sound. Illya kept running. When he was three yards from the cursing guard, he leaped. He hit the man's booted legs in a flying tackle. The guard clubbed wildly at Illya's head as they crashed into foot-deep snow, and rolled apart.

The snow filled Illya's mouth. He saw that the guard's rifle had fallen within reaching distance. He grabbed it, worked the slide to feed loads into the chamber. A long black shadow flittered across the sun-reddened snow to his left.

Sprawled on the ground, Illya barely had time to turn his head. The guard came slipping and sliding toward him, still on skis, a wicked glinting knife poised to throw. Illya squeezed the rifle trigger and held it down

The rifle stuttered. Bullets caught the guard in the chest, making him jerk and shudder. He threw reflexively as he died. Illya wrenched himself over into the snow. The knife grazed the back of his skull like a thin, slicing kiss and buried itself a foot beyond him.

Illya reached up, touched his neck. His fingers came away bloody. For a long moment the THRUSH guard remained upright, dead–but held erect by the skis. His pupils reflected the sinking sun glazing beyond one of the wild, jagged peaks that ringed the valley. Then he smashed forward on his face. Blood oozed out on the snow beneath his chest.

Illya glanced upward. The THRUSH station was built into the side of a mountain, its wall hewed from natural rock. The walls towered and were lost overhead in blowing snow. Here and there a glassy glare suggested a man-made surface of deeply inset window glass. Cone-shaped alarm horns were visible fifty feet up mounted out from the rock on steel stanchions. They bayed and warbled their frantic message out to the echoing mountain walls.

As he panted over to the dead guard and striped off the man's parka and mittens, Illya wondered why THRUSH had located their station in this godforsaken wilderness. The supra-nation always did try to hatch its doomsday devices in the most secret of locations, but this one was not only secret, it looked like the end of the earth.

Mountains completely surrounded the bowl-shaped valley. There was no way out that Illya could see, unless it might be through that faint, snow-walled notch on the eastern side, to his right. He decided to make for the notch. Everywhere else solid rock rose to bar his path.

He got the coat and mittens on, then went to work at top speed on the ski boots. These were two sizes too large. They would have to do.

Again a spell of dizziness threatened to pitch him head first. Illya stood unmoving until it passed. Warm wetness trickled down the back of his neck inside the parka.

How much blood would he loose from that scalp wound? Well, this was no time to think of it. He fitted the boots in the ski bindings, laced them up. The guard's poles were leaning against the side of the tunnel entrance. In a moment Illya had them. He slung the rapid-fire rifle over one shoulder, turned, took one quick gulp and pushed off down the snowy slope.

His legs felt like matchsticks as he manipulated the poles and went flashing past a looming drift. He had not been on skies more than two or three times in the past two years. Once he had been reasonably good at the sport. Now he was in terrible condition, weakened by the maltreatment in the cell. His teeth began to clatter like sticks banged on a trap drum rim.

The wilderness swam by in a haze of red-bathed snow. Wind bit his cheeks. Several times he nearly crashed into a drift. He fought constantly to control the perfectly-waxed skis, slaloming his way down the drifts.

Finally he began to lose momentum.

In a matter of another minute he had reached the bottom of the valley, where he faced the agonizing climb to the snowy notch which might be the only way out of–*Yes!* By the fading red light, he detected marks of other skis coming down from that notch. Powder driven by the wind had nearly obscured them.

The alarm sirens continued to warble and wail eerily across the big valley. Suddenly, as he was starting laboriously up the slope there was a flat, racketing blast. A geyser of snow shot upward several yards behind him.

A dozen men with weapons poured out of the fortress tunnel. The range for accurate shooting was too long. They had fired to announce their presence. And they didn't need to shoot him down anyway.

They were all on skis.

One by one, raven-figures against the snow, the THRUSH soldiers whizzed down the slope Illya had just descended. They skied fast and expertly, one behind the other. Illya gasped and started forward again. All at once his right ski went through the crust. His leg twisted painfully. He lost precious seconds regaining his footing. The notch seemed higher than before, impossible to reach.

Illya lifted his right ski, set it down.

Then his left.

His right.

Left–

Wind tore at his cheeks and made his ears tingle even under the fur of the parka. He struggled upward through the blurring red blaze of the twilight, realizing that his ears were ringing with the echo of the alarms.

The alarms had stopped.

Risking one more look back, Illya saw that he THRUSH ski patrol had reached the halfway point in its descent of the slope. Their rifle muzzles caught the fading light off the mountaintops. Faintly came the whish of their passage.

They did not shoot at him because they knew they could catch him and kill him later. They had a time and a place for everything.

Twelve black phantoms, they swept onward. With a strangled cry of dismay, Illya thrashed laboriously on toward the snow-walled notch.

FOUR

Napoleon Solo clung to the wheel of the gray car as it careened along the bridge over the St. Lawrence. Out of the west, wing to wing, the THRUSH planes came on, their jet after-burners howling.

Solo's stomach was knotted. They had him in their sights. If he stayed with the car, they would surely kill him on this pass.

The jets screamed closer.

Fighting the yaw of the car by holding the wheel iron-tight with his left hand, Solo reached over with his right. He pressed down on the door lever so that the latch retracted. From the left came the stutter of bullets.

Solo spun the wheel so that the auto was pointed straight down the center of the span. Then he yanked himself to the right, butted the door open with his head, balled his body and rolled out.

The whiplashing open door nearly decapitated him. Solo slammed the concrete with brutal force, knocking his head so hard he almost blacked out. The planes were almost over the bridge. Solo was banking on the pilots being unable to see down past the needle-tip noses of their craft to spot him lying on the pavement.

Bullets ripped and tore at the gray car. As the jets flashed over with a whine and crack of sound, the car's gas tank ignited. It blew up in a pillar of fire and a puffball of flame that smashed out through the left bridge rail and dropped like a fiery comet to the St. Lawrence far below.

With all of his body one hurting agony, Napoleon Solo still managed to drag himself to the rail. The planes had shot away into the east. They were banking up sharply to the left. Solo tossed a leg over the rail. The distance down to the river gave him incredible vertigo for a long moment.

Go on! His mind cried. *Go on or they'll make pass after pass until they kill you.*

Solo's mouth wrenched with effort as he lowered himself by his arms until he hung from the lip of the bottom-most horizontal undergirder in the span.

Thick, angled cross-bracings of steel spread away downward from this great girder to join the immense vertical concrete pilings sunk in the river. Solo stretched, caught one of the cross-members with slippery hands.

Hanging there with only his own strength to keep him from dropping, he managed to wriggle on to the diagonal steel brace. He wrapped his arms and legs around it, keeping his body on the west side. He had a tendency to slip. Raw metal ripped his cheek open. The jets were coming up the river again to inspect the kill. Sunlight flashed from their wings.

Solo hung on, biting down on his underlip and hoping the pilots would not spot him there in the shadows under the steel–

With a whine and a roar the jets burst past. They climbed into the western sky. They diminished to dots very quickly, disappearing north into Canada. Hand over hand, every muscle hurting from strain, Solo dragged himself back up the diagonal again. He caught the undergirder, swung free, hanging in space with his arms throbbing.

Clenching his teeth, he slowly pulled himself upward until he could seize one of the railing uprights. After more terrible seconds of effort, he clambered back over the bridge rail and felt solid concrete under his feet.

A black and white car belonging to Canadian border authorities was speeding on to the northern end of the bridge. Panting, Solo fumbled in his jacket for his credentials. A twelve-foot section of the rail was gone on the opposite side. Black skid marks showed the route the gray car had taken to destruction.

Napoleon Solo's lacerated temple throbbed. He felt awful.

But that was of small concern. Even the fact that he was still alive, though probably now listed as dead by THRUSH, didn't concern him. What drove into his mind like a hot awl was one fact above all else–

He had completely lost the trail of the blue sedan.

The Bells and Beth Andrews were lost in Canada. They would be in Doomsday Creek for the pickup by THRUSH before he could possibly reach them. There was only one outside possibility for saving the situation– a quick identification for the Canadian authorities screeching up in their sedan, and a message to U.N.C.L.E., Ottawa. Perhaps other agents could reach Doomsday Creek in time to catch up the thread of the trail.

He reached into his pocket for his communicator and keeled over on his face.

The struggle had taken its toll.

Solo did not waken for six hours. By the time he got out of the emergency ward of a hospital in Kingston, Ontario, even a call to Ottawa on

the communicator did no good. Agents sped to Doomsday Creek and found nothing. The trail was dead.

FIVE

Illya Kuryakin had no possible way of knowing that Napoleon Solo had survived the jet fighter attack on the bridge over the St. Lawrence. To Illya, Napoleon Solo was dead. That made his escape from THRUSH even more necessary. And it was this knowledge which gave him the strength he needed to continue his wild flight up the snowy slope of the valley.

Behind the ragged peaks where the snow-clouds whirled like scarves, the sun had nearly set. The THRUSH ski patrol had come to the end of the run at the bottom of the valley. The men were climbing up after him swiftly.

Illya was nearly to the snow-walled notch. He hoped it would offer a way of escape from the valley, but the going was getting rougher by the second. He slipped and sprawled again.

His fingers had turned numb inside the coarse THRUSH mittens. Snow-crystals clung to his eyebrows and lashes, melting quickly and making vision difficult. Every time he took an awkward, clumping step with one of his skis he let out low, guttural gasps. His energy was nearly gone. All that kept him going was the knowledge that he alone could carry word out of this inhuman valley about THRUSH's plan to devastate Toronto with darkness and cause the *Plowshare* jet with its passenger-load of international dignitaries to fall from the sky.

If I die, Illya thought, *it must be only after that message reaches Mr. Waverly.*

Illya took three more lurching steps. Suddenly it did not seem like such a struggle to stand. He had reached the top of the slope.

Above him on either hand reared the snow-thick walls of the notch. The notch or pass was about twenty feet across here at the bottom. Illya peered ahead and knew a brief, hurting moment of triumph–

From somewhere out of sight down a slope on the far side of the pass came the yells of a party of skiers. And in the red-etched dusk he glimpsed the gleaming yellowness of half a dozen lighted windows.

A small hamlet? An isolated ski lodge? He didn't know. At least those lights represented civilization. Illya estimated them to be three or four miles away. Could he make it that far, even if he eluded his pursuers?

They were climbing the slope fast behind him, each THRUSH man began using just one ski pole. With the free hand, each member of the dozen-man squad was unlimbering his rifle or machine pistol. Illya sucked in a lung-burning breath of the cold air. The pursuers made a silent, grotesque sight with their elongated shadows toiling up the slope ahead of them in the last wash of red light.

Facing front again, Illya poled into the crust and found that because the floor of the pass was reasonably level, he could propel himself along with some speed. He worked the poles feverishly for half a minute, shooting ahead until he was well into the pass, hidden by the looming shadows beginning to fill every corner of the world now that the sun had sunk.

Behind, the Thushmen saw that Illya Kuryakin had gained a slight advantage, was speeding ahead again. They began to curse, urging one another to hurry. The first parka crested the slope behind him.

The Thrushman dropped to a half-crouch. His machine-pistol stuttered. Spurts of snow leaped into the air barely a yard behind the spot where Illya was poling. Gulping for air, Illya realized he could not outrun them. Within seconds he would be shot down. In that terrible moment, a plan suggested itself.

He accepted it instantly, desperate though it was. Other THRUSH pistols and rifles began to burp and chatter. Illya flung himself into the cover of a frost-rimed boulder. A THRUSH bullet blasted a chip from it. The chip hit his cheek, wounding it.

The whole of Illya’s back under the parka was soaked with the blood from the knife-wound at the back of his head. He peered out from behind the boulder as the dozen THRUSH ski soldiers poled smoothly and gracefully into the pass proper.

Unslinging the rifle from his shoulder, Illya sighted, and began to pump bullets into the snow clinging to the wall of the pass high over his head. The air thundered with his shots, and with those of the Thrushmen. Their bullets bit into the rock that concealed him. The hot gun began to buck in his hands, no more loads slipping into the chamber. He threw the gun away and listened.

Overhead he heard the first grumbling, shifting rumble.

The THRUSH soldiers heard it too. They began calling urgent orders to one another. The men in the lead ceased firing, tried to scramble backward. They stumbled into their fellows. All at once the pursuers were falling over

one another in confusion. From the wall of the pass above, blasted loose by Illya's bullet, the first sections of snow broke free and began to plummet with a roar.

Beneath Illya's feet the snow vibrated. His ears filled with the thunder of more and more massive snow-slabs shearing away. All at once the world became a wall of roaring, thundering white. Grim-eyed, Illya watched the Thrushmen disappear shrieking beneath it. His face resembled a very satisfied death's head.

A huge soggy dollop of something plopped on top of his head with a soft impact. The whole pass still shook and vibrated. The end leading into the THRUSH valley was totally hidden by a grinding avalanche of snow. And the avalanche was spilling over into the rest of the pass–a second chunk struck his forehead and blinded him.

Illya wrenched his head up. His shots had loosed more destruction than he'd anticipated. In the last dying light, he saw an immense wall of snow directly over him peel away from the rock in great solid blocks.

Wildly Illya turned, jammed his poles into the crust, pushed himself ahead. He heard the last, faint outcries of his buried pursuers. If he has eluded them only to die himself–

His brain blacked out. He operated in a sort of trance, by sheer instinct, driving himself ahead as the pass trembled and shivered and the mighty mountain of snow struck.

Illya's wild flight had carried him a good distance, but it had not carried him quite far enough. He was struck on the back and lower body by a tremendous, sudden blow that knocked him forward. The roaring snow smashed the breath out of him, drove his face deep into the freezing crust.

Struggling and gasping for air, he burrowed his head out.

Both his poles had snapped. Snow was still pouring down the pass wall, though more slowly, building up in one immense, white mountain behind him. He was buried under the edge of this accumulation, buried from his chest to the tips of his boots.

Only Illya's shoulders, arms and head were free. He twisted, writhed, tried to drag himself out from under the crushing weight. He let out a low moan of rage.

Either he was too weak or the weight of the snow was too great or both. He could not move.

So close. *So close.* Ahead in the next valley, the blurred lights of the little town or lodge glimmered. Dimly he heard the voices of the skiers. He shouted out, “Here! Help! I need help! *Up here!”*

Hereherehererehere came the echo, bouncing back, dying away, *Hereherehere–*

Illya tried to dig with his fingers. Inside the mittens they felt wooden. The voices of the skiers died.

Silence now, except for a last faint shifting and grinding of the snow. Illya’s strength began to leave him. His mind played strange tricks. He could not move, pinned as he was beneath what was very probably at least a ton of snow. Presently, sick with defeat, he watched the distant lights wink out as his own senses went dark.

ACT IV

“IT’S DARK AND YOU’RE DEAD

With a feeling of reluctance Napoleon Solo said, “Open Channel D, please.”

In a moment the dry, familiar voice responded, “Yes, Mr. Solo? What have you to report?”

Napoleon Solo leaned against the window sill of his hotel room in Toronto. The sun was sinking. The buildings of the downtown began to cast long shadows. Lights in shop windows came on.

In the past few days Solo had become almost pathologically restless about the coming of darkness. He knew why. There had been no further blackouts anywhere. To him this signified that THRUSH was massing its resources for a final, devastating strike.

Where, though? And when? Each night at sunset Solo wondered whether this would be the night.

“Mr. Solo?” Waverly’s voice crackled from the reed-like communicator in Solo’s hand.

Wearily Solo rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Sorry, sir. I’m afraid there’s nothing new tonight either.”

A little rush of breathing, soft, explosive, signified Waverly’s impatience and tension. “We have nearly four hundred operatives working in Canada, Mr. Solo. Surely one of them has unearthed something.”

Solo turned away from the window so that he did not have to watch the darkness marching across the city. The spacious suite was disorderly. Newspapers littered the floor. Six special phones had been installed along the far wall. The remains of lunch stood on a silver cart. From this suite Solo had been directing a special search net of U.N.C.L.E. agents who had fanned out into the remotest provinces of Canada by plane, rail, bus, car, helicopter, skis, dogsled and virtually every other conceivable method of transportation.

The agents were searching for some clue as to where Harold and Maude Bell and Beth Andrews had been taken. The search had started seventy-two hours ago. So far it yielded only a few leads, all of which had proved false.

Solo continued, “The situation is the same as it was when I checked in this morning, sir. Nothing positive at all.”

Waverly harrumphed. “Mr. Solo, a rather uncanny thing is happening. All of our stations around the world report a sudden dropoff in THRUSH activity. Even known THRUSH agents appear to have retreated into hiding, no longer visiting their usual haunts. There is an uneasy feeling growing here at Headquarters–one which I share–that Thrush is readying itself for a major offensive. We will have to find Martin Bell.”

Fatigue lent Solo’s voice a harsh note. “We’re doing everything we can sir.”

“Not quite. I am releasing an additional two hundred men to you. You haven’t delivered on this one, Mr. Solo. But I–”

“No soft soap, please, sir. I’ve dropped the ball. That’s the worst part, the part I can’t bear.”

“Have you had any sleep?”

“How can I when something might break any minute? The back of my neck is crawling because I’m sure THRUSH is about to pull something. And here we sit, no sign of the Bells or Martin, not even knowing whether Illya is alive or dead.”

“Personal considerations must not becloud our efficiency,” said Waverly gently.

“Illya’s my friend! I can’t help feeling responsible–”

“That will be all for now, Mr. Solo,” Waverly said, his mild, precisely-enunciated words cutting Solo off in mid-sentence. “I will contact you in four hours to let you know when the first of the additional men will be arriving. Until then, I suggest you get some rest. In fact I order it.”

Solo winced. “Yes, sir,” he gave the break-off signal that closed the channel.

The hotel room had darkened into a place of thick, unfriendly shadows. Solo sighed. Waverly was right. Lack of sleep, plus a mounting sense of dread and his own stinging guilt feelings were combining to rob him of his wits and energy. He had to keep himself in decent shape until something broke.

Solo sprawled full length upon the bed, covered his eyes with his forearm. In the darkness of his mind as he dozed off, he saw a vast skyline spangled with lights. Suddenly the dream-city began to black out. From its

cement canyons rose a frightened wail, the single-voiced cry of mob panic piercing his eardrums, *piercing–*

Sweating, Napoleon Solo broke out of the half-dream and sat bolt upright. A small green bulb on one of the six phones had lighted. The buzzer's low, repeated note vibrated in the silence.

The green light! Solo scrambled for the phone. That would be Harforth, chief of the search team operating out of Ottawa. Solo snatched up the receiver. Harforth's voice was blurred by a bad connection:

"I believe we have something, Napoleon. One of my teams to the north just reported in. They saw an item in a newspaper. In a little ski resort fifty miles or so above Doomsday Creek–Saint Olaf is the name of the place–a skier was rescued a couple of days ago from the aftermath of an avalanche. A party of tourists taking a cross-country ski came across him. He was nearly frozen to death. The man is in the Sisters of Charity hospital in Saint Olaf. According to the little press clip he said his name is Kuryakin. He has said nothing else. The press clip says the authorities consider him an unidentified foreign national–"

Now Solo's pulse beat so hard in his left wrist that it almost hurt. "What's his condition?"

"Several badly broken bones. He's delirious most of the time. But I gather he will live. I talked to one of the sisters long distance just a moment ago. I explained a bit of the situation. I also contacted the Saint Olaf police and straightened them out. They are guarding him now!"

Harforth sounded as though he wore a weary smile. "I think it's Illya, all right. The description fits. I told them someone would doubtless be coming right away to interrogate him."

"Yes," Solo rapped out. "Me."

"The sister tried to be quite helpful. She had noted down some of the remarks Illya babbled while he was half-conscious. Not too promising, though. Here, let me look at my pad. Got it. Illya was muttering the word *plowshare* a lot. That mean anything?"

Solo's weary mind couldn't quite make the jump. "It should. I just can't remember. What else?"

"Apparently Illya raved a lot about how dark it was in the hospital room. Lights going out and all that. Sounded terrified of the idea–"

Solo's eyes narrowed in the gloom. Had Illya gotten onto something after all? Harforth continued, "–and then Illya was carrying on about time

running out. *No time,* the sister said he said. *No time left.* He fought and thrashed his covers about when he said it, as though he felt he must do something about it.

No time left? Solo turned cold. He said, “I’m on my way to the airport. I’ll radio you after we take off. We can work out the landing arrangements and a car pickup at the field nearest Saint Olaf.”

In twenty minutes an U.N.C.L.E. turbojet screamed up off the Toronto airport runway carrying Napoleon Solo into the far-lying Canadian darkness to the north.

TWO

Approximately twelve hours later, around eight the next morning, there was a good deal of activity in a certain warehouse left in one of the seamier sections near the lake shore in Toronto. The building in which all of his activity took place had formerly belonged, according to a large sign across its brick front, to *Bloor Bros. Movers and Transporters. Ltd.*

The brothers Bloor had moved elsewhere, leaving behind a *To Let* placard and a crumbling four-story ruin.

At dawn two oversized highway vans had rolled in through the wakening streets of Toronto. The vans headed for the lakefront district. Unmarked and ordinary-looking, these vans were now parked in the thick shadows of the loading bays once used by the trucks of the brothers Bloor.

Felix Corrigan and several other unpleasant-looking multi-clad souls from THRUSH. They lounged near the trucks, smoked and discouraged any intrusions by the curious. Overhead, in the topmost loft which measured a city block on each side and stank of musk and rodents, the last of a group of THRUSH technicians was just carrying a big wooden box off a freight elevator. The box wound up alongside ten or twelve others which had been unshipped from the vans.

With crowbars the THRUSH technicians attacked the cartons. They jimmied off the thick wooden sides, pulled out the cotton-wool packing by handfuls. They then unloaded various delicate pieces of electronic equipment. These smaller components were assembled quickly into larger ones and arranged in a rough semicircle on the grimy wood-plank floor.

A small portable generator was cranked up. It provided the power for some small pin-spotlights on stanchions. The beams were direct on the faces of the sections of machinery. The THRUSH technicians stripped off their dusty coveralls and went to work, testing switches, calibrating dials.

In the center of the work area the innocuous-looking black-box unit was hooked into another, larger machine, the radius booster, by three thick cables wrapped in bright red insulation.

Dr. Leonidas Volta observed the operations with uncontrolled glee. His reddish hair was as disorderly as ever. His pale blue-marble eyes shone in the gloom.

“Splendid, splendid!” he observed, turning to nudge the weary looking scarecrow beside him. “I’m sure you think so too–don’t you, Martin?”

“You know what I think of your rotten organization,” said Martin Bell.

The young man’s face was bruised. His cheap slacks and white shirt were torn in several places. By contrast, Dr. Volta was impeccable in a double-breasted pin stripe, white shirt with two inches of cuff showing, large diamond cufflinks, a tie with a pattern of small red and pink flowers and a handkerchief that was a waterfall of white points at his breast pocket.

Dr. Volta scowled. “Martin, THRUSH recognizes and appreciates the cooperation you have shown on the trip down here. I should hate to see you spoil your record now. I–what is wrong?”

“I can’t do this. I can’t run the machines and bring that plane down. I–I thought I could. I thought I could make myself go through with it but I can’t.”

Dr. Volta clipped Martin neatly on the cheek with the back of his hand. The THRUSH technicians went on working without turning around.

“Kindly remember yourself,” Volta said. “If you fail to cooperate at any time, I need only to instruct my operator to open a channel on that radio–” Volta indicated one of the pieces of equipment in the semicircle. “–and I will be in instant contact with our station near Saint Olaf. One word from me, dear boy, one small word and your American sweetheart will be subjected to the most excruciating of tortures. Next will come your father. Finally your mother. We can even arrange to have their shrieks and supplications for mercy piped in here, if you require additional persuasion.”

“All right,” Martin Bell said.

Dr. Volta continued to describe, with considerable relish, some of the specific tortures which would be employed. Finally Martin covered his face with his hands.

“All right! I *hear* you! I’ll do it.”

Dr. Volta lit up a long cigarette and nodded. “Why don’t you sit down, Martin? Where is that camp stool we brought along for our young friend?” He snapped his fingers. One of the technicians scuttled off, returned with the stool. Martin slumped into it. Dr. Volta patted Martin’s shoulder.

“Calm yourself, my boy. Nothing is required of you until the equipment is hooked together. *Plowshare* will not take off until late this afternoon. Only at that time will you be called upon to operate the anti-power unit. Until then, amuse yourself! Think positive thoughts! Think of how you

have saved your dear little girl and your parents from unmitigated agony! Martin?"

Dr. Volta leaned forward, unable to get Martin's attention. The young scientist still had his hands over his face. He appeared to be rocking back and forth in utter misery.

Actually Martin Bell was quite wide awake, sharp-minded and grimly determined to do what he could about the situation. He could not stand by and let THRUSH force him to employ his machine at full power. And until now he had seen no possible way to save the situation.

The technicians worked to ready the machinery. He watched then covertly from behind his hands. He was scared. He was not a born hero, not even a professional espionage agent. But he understood the dials of the complicated radio unit which Volta had pointed out a moment ago.

As the hours of the morning ticked past, Martin studied that particular console until he knew it by heart.

Food was brought in at noon. Around three, the technicians reported everything ready. Another hour passed.

Shortly after four a signal light on the radio flashed.

Volta jumped forward, threw over a toggle. "Yes, yes?"

"Dr. Volta," a man said, "this is station six. My car is parked just beyond the fence at the end of the main runway. *Plowshare* is now airborne. She just went up."

"Out," Dr. Volta cracked, wasting no time. He snapped his fingers. "Martin Bell! Here, please!"

Martin roused himself. His palms itched. His stomach was cold. The THRUSH technicians stood back to let him move up beside Dr. Volta.

A radar unit began to beep-beep. A technician called out, "*Plowshare* in the pattern, Dr. Volta."

A small blip crawled into the center of the display glass.

Dr. Volta gestured expansively. "My dear young friend, kindly take the generator controls. You know what you are to do. Focus your apparatus upon that plane, kill its power and bring it down. Damp all power, please. We want it to crash."

Dr. Volta giggled. "Then as soon as *Plowshare* is down, we shall spread the beam and black out our test area. Not fifty miles this time. A radius of one hundred miles which–Martin! You hesitate! Aren't you delighted to see your device being tested at full capacity? What a magnum opus! One of the

largest cities in the Western hemisphere orchestrated to a symphony of darkness and terror by *you*!"

Volta sniffed. "Personally, I would be thrilled at the prospect. But you Americans–well, enough. You are delaying, Martin."

When Volta got no response this time, he shook Martin's shoulder.

"You are *delaying*, Martin. Operate the controls or–*stop him*!"

Dr. Leonidas Volta's strangled cry burst out as he was bashed over backwards by Martin Bell's well-intended, though rather anemic punch. Still, the surprise of it gave Martin the moment he needed.

Dr. Volta crashed against the small computer. The THRUSH technicians seemed too startled to move.

Martin slammed his elbow into the head of the operator seated before the radio. As the THRUSHMAN slid off his stool, Martin's hands shot out to the dials whose positions he had been memorizing all day.

Over went this switch. Up went that gain. Needles peaked. Martin shouted into the microphone, "My name is Martin Bell. I am being held prisoner at a place called Bloor Brothers, a warehouse in Toronto. I am being held prisoner by THRUSH and being forced to operate my anti-electrical generator to bring down an aircraft which has just taken off from the Toronto airport. This aircraft is the *Plow–"*

Dr. Volta was howling at his helpers, ordering them into action. Martin dared not look around. Feet slammed. A cruel hand grabbed his shoulder as he rushed on:

"–*Plowshare*, the experimental plane which is carrying dignitaries from–"

The first brutal blow landed from behind, smashing Martin Bell's head forward against the quivering dials of the radio transmitter.

Napoleon Solo said, "No one move, please." In his right hand he held the long-muzzled pistol. "This plane is turning back."

At Solo's feet lay the steward for the special flight, a tray of shattered glasses beside him. The bubbly liquid ran down the channels in the floor of the vast, undecorated interior of *Plowshare.*

The great supersonic transport was lifting up off the end of the runway. Solo felt the thrust against the soles of his shoes, struggled to stand upright as the deck tilted. His suit was untidy. His tie dangled askew. He looked a fright, and his nerves were taut-strung.

All up and down the interior of the great silver-sleek transport, various international personages in morning coats or the uniforms of their respective countries turned to stare. Here a bearded and turbaned Sikh gaped in astonishment. There a frock-coated Malaysian dignitary goggled. Further down, an overstuffed Englishman dropped his monocle from his eye.

The twenty-two representatives of the nations which had cooperated in constructing the huge aircraft were seated in special armchairs bolted to the floor for this maiden flight. They had been peering out the windows at the sunlit Toronto skyline when Solo leaped aboard, slamming the hatch behind him just as *Plowshare* hurtled forward for takeoff, its six gigantic jets roaring.

“FitzMaurice,” a tall ebony-skinned African diplomat said, “who on earth is this madman?”

I don’t know,” said the man so addressed, a burly, red-cheeked Canadian air marshal with many rows of decorations on his uniform. “But we shall jolly soon find out.”

Threateningly but cautiously, Air Marshal FitzMaurice lifted himself from the chair nearest Solo. “Whatever your scheme, you’ll be caught, of course. Executed, probably.”

“My name is Napoleon Solo. United Command for Law and Enforcement.”

Solo saw that they didn’t believe him. He flung his credentials to FitzMaurice. Still the faces showed hostility, fear, skepticism. The gigantic transport was climbing steadily now, late afternoon sunlight flickering through the round window-ports.

“There is going to be a power failure,” Solo said. “Its purpose is to knock this plane down and kill all of you. Tell the pilot to land.”

Air Marshal FitzMaurice snorted. “Do you seriously expect me to obey such an order?”

Dismally, Solo did not. He knew he looked like a gritty-eyed lunatic. His face was beard-stubbled and grimy. But he had been moving fast since leaving Toronto last night.

First he had gone to Illya’s bedside in Saint Olaf. After long hours of interrogation, he had pieced together enough from Illya’s delirious ramblings to understand that THRUSH was striking in Toronto today, first at the MST-1 on its maiden flight, then at the entire city.

Solo flew back to Toronto at once, landing just moments ahead of *Plowshare's* takeoff. Security officers at the gate refused him admittance to the takeoff area. There was no time to contact Waverly. Solo used two capsule of knockout gas, jumped the fence and leaped aboard the MST-1 just as the hatch closed.

"Look," Solo said. "What have you got to lose by taking a chance that I'm telling the truth?"

Carefully, stiffly, Air Marshal FitzMaurice brushed at his flowing mustache. "A great deal, my dear fellow. The roadblocks which stood in the way of the construction of this internationally-financed aircraft were considerable. We cannot risk a setback in the program. And one would certainly occur if by an incomplete maiden flight. Furthermore, my good man, you have presented us with no evidence. You've only crashed aboard here brandishing that gun and crying alarms without foundation."

"Save your oration for the press corps," Solo cried, charging up the aisle before FitzMaurice could stop him. He waved his pistol to and fro rather melodramatically, but the effect was achieved. Most of the dignitaries gripped the arms of their chairs and cringed back out of his way. He was well on the way to the unpainted bulkhead which led onto the flight deck when a beefy hand caught his shoulder, spun him around.

FitzMaurice had caught up, plainly would not be cowed. "See here! I said you would not disrupt this flight."

"Air Marshal," Solo said with desperate politeness, "if you don't let go I'm afraid I'm going to have to deck you."

"Help me hold him! Don't just sit there!" FitzMaurice called to his startled fellow-passengers, and wrapped Solo in a crushing, grunting bear-hug.

"You idiot!" Solo yelled. A bearded Sikh discarded caution and leaped to help. Solo was tackled at the knees. In a moment he, the Sikh and FitzMaurice were floundering back and forth on the champagne-running floor.

Solo shoved his elbow into FitzMaurice's ribs. He was getting angry now, enraged at the way these stubborn fools refused to heed him. FitzMaurice responded by belting Solo's midsection with a formidable fist.

Another delegate joined the fray. Above the howl of the six mighty jets thrusting the plane higher into the twilight sky over Toronto, the voices of

his adversaries rose to a clamor. Soon Napoleon Solo was inundated beneath a crush of bodies.

At last Solo managed to squeeze his shoulders and head out of the octopus-tangle of foes. The moment he did, he found himself staring straight into the blazing eyes or Air Marshal FitzMaurice, who had his fist cocked back and was bellowing to no one in particular, “Knock him out! Knock him out!”

If that meaty fist connected, Solo knew, it would very likely be lights out. Finish. And he could not squirm sufficiently to wrench himself out of the way of the punch.

The fist rocketed wildly at Solo’s head–

“*Attention, please. Attention. This is Commander Godwin. We’re going down.”*

The urgent voice rattled over the cargo plane’s loudspeaker system. Startled, FitzMaurice pulled his punch a fraction of an inch from Napoleon’s jaw. He screwed his head around. “The pilot’s gone balmy too.”

FitzMaurice disentangled himself from the chaos of brawling bodies, leaped up and lunged forward to the bulkhead. He did not bother to observe protocol and knock.

He kicked the door open and cried, “Commander Godwin! What’s the meaning of this?”

From his vantage point at the bottom of the human pile Solo glimpsed the strained faces of the four Royal Canadian Air Force fliers on the flight deck. *Plowshare* banked sharply.

Some of the bodies slid off Solo. He managed to crawl to his knees as one of the flying officers unbuckled himself from his chair and rushed back to block FitzMaurice at the door to the flight deck.

“We’ve been ordered down by Canadian Air Defense, sir. Something about a strange radio message. They picked it up a few moments ago. Some chap was broadcasting for help. Scientist feller or something. He said some sort of anti-electricity thingamajing was going to be turned on this plane to bring her crashing down–”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along!” Solo shouted, finally extricating himself.

The man up front in the pilot’s chair, evidently Commander Godwin, whirled round and yelled, “Who the devil is doing all that shouting back there? Get in your seats! Fasten your belts! We aren’t going to make any

pretty pat-a-cake landing. Air Defense says take no chances. I'm going to set her down fast."

Racing ahead, Solo pushed by the protruding corporation of the baffled Air Marshal. He thrust onto the flight deck. Before Commander Godwin could order him off, he said, "My name is Napoleon Solo, Commander, U.N.C.L.E."

In terse syllables Solo explained how he had gotten aboard *Plowshare*, and why. Out beyond the cockpit windshield and the immense aerodynamic snout of the gigantic plane the Toronto skylines slipped past in a golden sunset haze. "Do you know whether the broadcast Air Defense picked up was legitimate?"

"I monitored it," said another of the officers, the one wearing telephones. "Got bits and crackles of it. The chap hollering sounded scared to death. But even if it wasn't legitimate, if it was just some crank with a bolt loose in his noggin, Air Defense doesn't fiddle around. I heard the chap give his name right at the first. Can't quite remember what–"

Solo sucked in a deep breath, hoping: "It wasn't Bell, was it? Martin Bell?"

"Bang on the nose if it wasn't! And there was some funny jabber about a bird."

"A little thrush," Solo whispered. "This attack on the plane was only the first stage. These people are planning to knock out all the power in Toronto and for miles around. Did Air Defense get a fix on the location of the transmitter?"

"They usually do," the radio officer answered. "By the time we land they should have triangulated to the point where the source can be identified, and–"

Commander Godwin exclaimed, "Knock off the chatter and clear the deck! Power's going."

Solo's skin crawled. For the past seconds he had paid no attention to their situation. Through the cockpit window he now saw that *Plowshare's* nose was pointed downward at the edge of the runway. They were in the final seconds of descent. Godwin's face had turned white.

The flight engineer flipped emergency toggles. The roar of the jets had diminished, blending now with the minor-key whistle of the wind. Even Air Marshal FitzMaurice stopped jabbering as Godwin called for a trim of flaps.

The ground rushed up like a juggernaut. There were not even seconds in which to call for emergency fire crews to stand by.

“Hang on, all,” said Commander Godwin, and eased his throttle back a fraction as the mammoth air transport flashed over the edge of the runway.

Concrete whipped away underneath the nose. The great tires bumped, bumped again. “Give me reverse thrust, Charlie, and pray.”

The sweating engineer threw switches frantically. “Reverse thrust,” he wheezed. The six huge engines coughed, shuddered. There was a single blast of sound, a sharp slackening of the craft.

Eyes riveted to his controls, the engineer breathed, “That was the last gasp, Commander. Power’s completely dead.”

We can make it now,” Commander Godwin said. “I am almost sure.”

For long seconds there was strained silence throughout the plane as Godwin wrestled the controls. Finally Solo felt the craft slowing to a safe speed.

Godwin negotiated a turn onto a taxi strip. Red crash trucks flashed toward the silver giant from all directions, sirens howling. Godwin simply let *Plowshare* coast to a stop on the hard-packed yellow clay beyond the end of the taxi strip.

The commander wiped his glistening forehead and for the first time really turned to look at Napoleon Solo.

“Whoever you are, my friend, you certainly had the right message.”

Air Marshal FitzMaurice said under his breath, “Incredible! Positively incredible.”

“The incredible part is just beginning,” Solo said in a raw voice. Look there.” The sprawling Toronto air terminal lay shadowed in the dusk. Every last light had gone out.

THREE

Dr. Leonidas Volta held Martin Bell's left arm, bending it up at an excruciating angle behind the young scientist's back. Another THRUSH technician had both hands clamped on Martin's neck, holding him down onto the little camp stool in front of the semicircle of machinery in the Bloor Brothers loft.

Dr. Volta's bright marble-blue eyes burned in the dim light of the jury-rigged spotlights. There was the glow of madness in them.

"No more little tricks, Martin," he said. "No more little stratagems, please. Operate the equipment. You do not realize the depth of my feelings. Do you? Do you, hah?"

Volta gave Martin's left arm another wrench. The young scientist clenched his teeth, incapable of moving as the cruel pain wracked him. Volta hissed: "I am responsible for the success of this project. Upon this project rides my reputation, my status with THRUSH. I was the one who was supposed to conceive the anti-electricity generator."

"It was into my laboratory that THRUSH Central poured a fantastic percentage of its research budget. And I failed them. So this is my last chance. If you try to betray me one more time as you did with that radio message I will break your arm off and signal Saint Olaf to begin killing your mother. Am I quite clear?"

Volta's fright-wig of red hair was even more disarrayed than usual. His pin-striped suit was rumpled. In his blue-marble eyes, fanaticism and desperation glared.

"I–I need both hands," Martin said in a choked voice.

A technician tugged at Volta's sleeve, whispered. Dr. Volta's cheeks mottled. He released Martin's arm and instantly gave him a vicious slap in the side of the head.

"You're message cost us *Plowshare!* The plane is turning back. You have one final chance to save yourself and the ones you love. Black out the city of Toronto and do it now!"

Pale, Martin Bell rubbed his wrists. He looked defeated, lost, as though he were thinking of Beth Andrews, his parents. Finally he said, "All right."

"Stand away," Volta ordered.

The other THRUSH technicians backed off. Dr. Volta reached into his coat. He drew out a small pistol. “Martin,” he said, “at the first sign of treachery I will shoot you in the back of the head. Then I will order your loved ones killed. Now turn on the equipment. Give me full, all-directional power, and at once.”

Martin’s hands stood out white in the gloom as he reached forward and began turning controls to bring down the darkness.

FOUR

At an intersection in the distance an automobile had been overturned. A small mob of looters had set it afire. The flames licked upward, the only light in the otherwise impenetrable darkness of the warehouse district along the lakefront.

Several moments earlier Napoleon Solo had been chased by another band of looters. He had eluded them only after a wild dash down back alleys. Among the voices in the mob he'd heard one with a distinctly Continental accent. The voice exhorted the others to violence, to murder. Solo was sure now that THRUSH had sent infiltrators into Toronto to create panic and disorder an hour and a half ago when the blackout began.

Gunfire crackled from the direction of the business district. Panting and footsore, Solo drove himself forward along the sidewalk under the loom of a windowless brick wall.

He had gotten to within three miles of the Bloor Brothers warehouse in a car commandeered at the airfield. Then the blackout had caught him. The car's engine conked out. He had come the rest of the way on foot, eluding mobs and racing toward the source of the devastation.

A phone call to Canadian Air Defense just before all communications systems failed revealed that Martin Bell had given his whereabouts in his desperate broadcast for help. Hugging the wall of the building, Solo now could see his goal on the opposite side of the street a block down. The huge *Bloor Brothers–Movers and Transporters, Ltd.* gleamed in the starlight.

The darkness of the city made his spine crawl. So did the noises of riot and alarm which the night wind carried. He heard windows smashing, people baying blindly in terror, guns exploding. The Canadian Army had been mobilized to join the municipal police and units of the R.C.M.P. in an attempt to maintain order and spread word that the cause of the blackouts was known and the source would soon be put out of action.

That, thought Napoleon Solo, as he slipped along in the shadows, was optimism he did not share.

Never had he seen THRUSH devastate a city so completely without actually taking a single destructive action. He knew that if he failed now,

chaos would reign. Knowing it was all that kept him moving along the pitch black street. His strength was nearly spent.

In his right hand he clutched the long-muzzled pistol. He stopped, crouched down. The cowls of two unpainted vans were discernible in the main loading bay of the establishment. Solo stole forward again, angling across the street in a staggering run. He'd seen no guards posted near those big trucks–

The guards had been hiding. They reared up when he was right in the middle of the street. "Stand right there or–It's our old friend Solo!"

Shadow shapes had risen beyond the cowl of the first truck. Starlight gleamed on machine-pistol muzzles. And the voice that had called out belonged to Felix Corrigan.

Suddenly Corrigan darted around to the front of the nearest van. He leveled his machine pistol and blasted a smoking barrage of orange streaks at the point where Solo stood. The bullets chewed up asphalt as Solo flung himself down and to one side. He hit hard, banging his head. Lights danced behind his eyes.

Corrigan's bulk loomed as the big man stepped out into the street to get a clearer shot at his target. Frantically Solo flung out his right arm, squeezed the trigger. The pistol popped. Corrigan shrieked, slammed back against the truck's dark headlights. As he died his finger convulsed on the firing mechanism. Orange fire-bursts ate up the night again. Solo started rolling but one of the bullets ripped through his right shoulder; a pyrotechnic of pain.

With Corrigan sliding dead down over the truck bumper, the other THRUSH guards leaped forward to fire. Solo lay dazed, fingers within inches of the pistol that had fallen from his nerveless right hand.

He rolled over. He got his left hand on the butt. He swung the gun up, twisted the cylindrical baffle on the muzzle end until he heard it click. He waited until the new loads had dropped into the chamber. Then, as the THRUSH guards opened up, Solo shot back, this time a hissing stream of pellets that exploded acrid smoke inside the loading bay. Within seconds the THRUSH outpost was decimated. Every last man lay sprawled out sleeping as the last whiff of the tranquilizing smoke drifted away.

Blood soaked Solo's sleeve, dribbled off his wrist. He lurched across the street into the bay, dragged himself up rickety stairs to a large service elevator.

The elevator had no door. Rather, it was closed off by an accordion-fold steel wicket. Solo pushed this aside–it felt as though it weighed three tons–and slid into the cage.

He thumbed the button. The motors whined, growled. The lift began to rise. Solo leaned against the cage's solid left wall, gulping air. The lift reached the next floor above, jerked to a stop.

Darkness.

Nothing but darkness and the smell of old wood and mold out there.

Solo punched the button. The cage started upward again, creaking discordantly.

Too noisy, Solo thought. *Like an alarm.*

But there was no choice now. His strength was almost gone. He had to gamble while he could. When the cage started up for the topmost floor Solo saw faint gleams of light and heard voices. They knew he was coming.

The moment the top of the front grating cleared the floor of the loft, THRUSH men, vague phantoms in pale coats, thrust gun muzzles down at him. Solo hugged the front of the cage, emptying his pistol upward.

The tranquilizing pellets popped and bloomed. The Thrushmen dropped, thudding. Some of the gas drifted back to Solo's nostrils, making his feeble condition even worse. By the time the cage ground to a halt he was hanging on the front grating.

It took him a moment to realize that his pistol did not respond because he had discharged the last of the gas charges. He fought to clear his own vision. Just as the loft sharpened into focus, a pistol crashed twice.

Solo dropped to the floor of the cage as the bullets tore huge holes in the elevator's rear wall. Through a film of dizziness, Solo saw a bank of glowing machines far down the loft floor in pools of light cast by small spotlights on stanchions.

Dr. Leonidas Volta was there, blue eyes standing out like small shining plates.

Dr. Volta's head peeped over Martin Bell's shoulder. Volta had his left arm hooked around Martin's neck, his other thrust forward under Martin's right arm. And that right hand held a pistol that barked and snapped at Solo again.

The shots ripped more wall from the cage. Solo's fingers felt numb. He tried to snap the cylindrical baffle back around on the muzzle so that it would fire the last regular bullets in the chamber.

His sweat-slicked fingers finally slipped off.

Dr. Volta was backing against the machinery, still using Martin for a shield. Volta screamed, “I see you, Solo! You’re supposed to be dead. It’s dark. We’ve brought back the dark and you should be dead. Why have you come back to torment me?”

The high, keening wail of Volta’s voice was the sound of a man who had suddenly stared into the face of failure, who had been unable to accept it, and who had gone mad.

Desperately Solo clamped his fingers around the baffle, twisted. The effort brought pain. He lay hugging the floor of the elevator cage while Volta howled, “If you come for me, Solo, I will shoot Martin. I promise I will.”

“Mr. Solo?” Martin called. “I know your name. You’re–”

“U.N.C.L.E.,” Solo called back.

“Stand still!” Volta shrieked, jerking his prisoner hard around the neck. “You’re supposed to be dead, Solo. Dead on the St. Lawrence bridge. Our planes–”

Solo panted out a bluff: “Turn off the apparatus, Volta. The building is surrounded.”

“Liar! You’re alone! You’re all alone there–”

Abruptly, while Volta was mouthing obscene curses at the top of his lungs, Martin bell doubled his right arm and jammed it into Volta’s midsection. Volta yelped.

Martin gave one terrific lunge and pulled away. The force of his lunge made him stumble. He sprawled on to the board floor.

Red hair flying, pin-stripe suit a shambles, Dr. Leonidas Volta whipped up his pistol, pointing it straight at Martin Bell’s head.

With both hands fastened on the butt of his gun to steady it, Napoleon Solo fired.

Dr. Volta’s arms jerked up. His shot plowed into the black-box which was humming quietly among the other machinery as it sent out the impulses to darken the city. The moment the bullet struck the box gave off a low, sharp roar. Yellow-green sparks began to hiss and spurt from the junctions where the three thick red cables joined it.

The sparks lit up Dr. Volta’s fright-wig head. The THRUSH scientist’s mouth dropped open. He stared down at the bloodstain forming in the center of his shirt bosom.

Dying on his feet, Dr. Volta still managed to give one forlorn, protective wail.

He dropped his pistol, turned and seized the black-box apparatus as though he must shield–

Martin Bell yelled a warning. Dr. Volta's hands clapped onto the black-box apparatus. A gigantic burst of hissing, shooting sparks erupted from the machine.

Volta stiffened. His limbs, his chest, his head glowed eerily green. Hundreds of thousands of volts of electricity poured through his body as he fell.

A reek of burned insulation filled the loft. Groggily Martin bell picked himself up. One by one all the dials and indicators on the machinery were going dark. Smoke drifted.

Young Martin Bell picked up the black-box, looked down at the dead man. Solo had seldom seen such utter loathing on a human face.

"The swine!" the boy panted. "The utter swine! He told me what he would do to Beth and Mother. He said he would–"

"Easy, son," Solo said. "He's dead. He was crazy, you know. He can't hurt you now. Actually, you know–"

He was beginning to feel funny. Blood-soaked and lying on his belly on the floor of the elevator, Napoleon Solo mumbled, "I always did like fireworks." Then he passed out.

Five

Alexander Waverly said, "What a truly heartwarming night. And one which we rather take for granted. Or did."

Outside the window of the headquarters conference room, Manhattan's lights twinkled. From Napoleon Solo (arm in a sling) and Illya Kuryakin (wheelchair, with a mammoth plaster cast on his left leg) Waverly's remark drew small, wordless murmurs of agreement.

Of the lot of them, only Martin Bell looked reasonably healthy. He had on a neat new suit.

"Mr. Waverly," Martin said, "I can't say it too many times. If your men hadn't acted so quickly and parachuted into that mountain place the way they did, Beth and my folks might not be alive tonight."

"Tut tut, my boy," said Waverly. "Merely our job. Be thankful that Mr. Solo managed to knock out your apparatus and stop the blackout before

things really got out of hand. But speaking of your parents, Martin, aren't they due here momentarily? With your young lady?"

Martin smiled. "Yes, sir. We're going out to dinner and then to the theater. To celebrate."

"We all have much to celebrate," Waverly agreed. "How about you, Mr. Solo? A little festivity planned for the evening?"

Solo grinned. "My fan-carrying soprano comes off stage at eleven-thirty."

Mr. Waverly glanced at Illya's mammoth foot cast.

"Poor Mr. Kuryakin. He alone is left incapacitated, unable to toast our signal victory over the forces of THRUSH. Perhaps, Mr. Kuryakin, you would prefer that I keep you company? We might find a taxi driver willing to help us load your wheelchair. Steak and brandy. How does that sound? It's certainly the least U.N.C.L.E. can do to reward you for yeoman service."

"Thank you anyway, sir," Illya replied, "but Dr. Whitcombe is coming in shortly to check my cast and change my other bandages."

Waverly looked vague. "Ah, yes. One of ours?"

Napoleon Solo coughed discreetly. "Yes, sir, from the Dispensary, sir. Dr. Arlene Whitcombe, and if her bedside manner is anything to match her figure, well–" Napoleon Solo gave a wicked grin.

"Oh" Mr. Waverly blinked. "Oh yes, I see. Well, then–" He picked up his hat.

"Have a good time, all," Illya Kuryakin called as the rest trooped out. He wiggled his toes down inside the plaster cast and, with a puckish grin, said to no one in particular, "I certainly intend to."